deep roots (are not reached by the frost)

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by fanfictiongreenirises

Summary

Dick gets reverted to a younger self after being kidnapped on during a case. But this is far from a routine de-aging.

In which the author attempts to mend a few relationships here and there.

Notes

For the "De-Aged" square on my Batman Bingo card!!! I'm debating whether or not I can cross it off now or after this fic is complete

I've been wanting to write this fic for a while now, and I finally got... too impatient to not begin? The literal purpose of this is honestly a h/c fix-it for Dick and Bruce's relationship lol, and rn the plan is that it'll cover events up to mostly Infinite Crisis. I'm not too strict with canon so I may pull stuff from after that (e.g. Damian's in this and Tim is Red Robin).

Also I'm on the fence about whether or not this is in the same verse as *if the stars we used to wish on (disappear into the night)* lol so it's probably okay to assume that those events did happen unless I explicitly say that they didn't? (Look it's mostly bc I'm lazy and don't want to go over character development and also character knowledge development again lmao).
No need to read that fic to understand this one.

More tags and warnings will be added as I go along. I'll put up chapter warnings at the start.

Warnings: referenced/implied child abuse (canonical)

Disclaimer: I don't own DC. Title from Tolkien's The Fellowship of the Ring.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Dick feels wrong in his skin. That's the first thing he notices when he comes to (wakes up? no; the feeling is much too abrupt to be given that phrasing). It's not as though it's an entirely new sensation, though. It's just that this time, it's a different sort of itchy.

He doesn't belong here.

Dick maintains his breathing, opening his eyes into tiny slits before letting out a tiny huff of air, almost as though he were sleeping. But it's fine, it's just the Manor—

Oh.

He isn't supposed to be here anymore, is he? Dick doesn't try to control his breathing any longer, eyes snapping open. This is… well, this isn't *his* bedroom, but that's his poster on the wall there, and Dick thinks he can see the glint of his telescope behind a screen.

There's an IV drip attached to him, and his limbs have that lethargic feeling that comes from not moving around in much too long. Dick sits upright, careful not to disturb the IV line and the heart monitor, because he needs to leave here undetected, and Bruce always has a signal that goes to the Cave - and other various parts of the Manor - when any of the monitors are disturbed.

His leg is still stiff and aching, and when he winces at the feeling of moving it, he has to bite down a gasp as the bruise on his cheek pulls. It abruptly reminds him why he can't be here anymore.

Dick's cane is nowhere in sight, and he doesn't relish the thought of having to hobble out of the Manor. He's just pulling himself over to the nightstand, where there's a glass of water with a cover placed over it, when there are voices outside.

Dick panics. There's no other way of putting it. The monitor picks up the change and the beeps increase in speed, and before Dick can do anything more than turn around to face the door, it swings open.

"Who're you?" The question is out of Dick's mouth before he can think to stop himself. Does he even *want* to know the answer? The last time someone unknown had shown up after Dick was kicked out, it'd been a replacement Robin.

The thought of Jason makes something in Dick spasm, and he has to squeeze his eyes shut and breathe for a moment.

When he reopens them, the man is stepping closer, arms raised in front of him and conveying every move he makes.

“It’s okay,” the man says, and suddenly Dick can’t breathe again. “You’re safe. You’re in the Manor.”

“Who are you.” The words come out choked. It’s no longer a question, because now Dick wants to know even less than he did before.

The man comes closer, and Dick backs a step, stumbling into the nightstand in his haste to move away.

“Dick?” Jason says with a frown. “Look, I’m not going to hurt you. I work with Bruce. I’ll get him—”

“No,” Dick wheezes before his legs give out and then Jason is launching himself forward to try and catch him.

Dick crashes to the ground before he can get there, but now he can see Jason’s face properly, and it confirms it.

The Jason in front of him has a white stripe in his hair, and there are scars and wrinkles on his face that Dick’s Jason – the *dead* Jason, the one who’s been dead for months that he only found out about *yesterday* – doesn’t have. He’s *big*, too, big in a way Dick associates with Bruce and Clark and heavy hitters.

Jason is saying something to him, but Dick can’t process it through the buzzing in his ears. “You’re dead,” he whispers. He doesn’t even know if he says it aloud, but Jason’s mouth shuts with an audible sound.

Dick raises a hand and brings it to Jason’s arm, the body part closest to him. It’s solid.

You’re dead you’re dead you’redeadyou’redeadyou’redead—

The next time Dick wakes up, there’s a fuzziness in his mouth that comes from being given sedatives. He brings a hand up to scrub at his eyes, uncaring of the various monitors he’s no doubt attached to. Bruce knows he’s here by now; there’s no way to get around another confrontation if Bruce wants one.

“Dick?”

Dick jolts, heartrate spiking. He didn’t expect it to be Bruce’s voice, not here. He thought he’d at least have time to collect himself. He didn’t want to have this conversation at all, not if he can help it, but he’d prefer to be *sitting,* at least.

Dick slowly pushes himself upright, not looking at Bruce seated in the chair by his head. It’s a familiar armchair, one that Bruce (and often Alfred, as well) would sit in when he read to him before bed, or even when he was sick and someone would be in Dick’s room for the night.

Dick takes off the clip on his finger, an alarm going off instantly. Bruce doesn’t stop him. He does, however, put a hand over Dick’s when Dick goes to take out the IV drip. Dick stares at it for a moment before moving his arm away.

“Hey,” Bruce says, in that rumbling tone of his. It’s strange; normally Bruce wouldn’t be this calm. It just goes to prove the theory Dick’s gradually been building in his subconscious. “Are you with me?”

“Where is he?” Dick says instead. Thinking of this as being Bruce only makes things worse. It’s better to consider him as a different person, because then the longing, the *confusion*, hurts less. “The man who was here when I woke up before. Jason.”

There’s a moment of silence before Bru—*Batman*—answers. “He’s in the kitchen.” His voice is careful. “We thought it best he wasn’t here. You seemed…upset. At his presence.”

Dick digested this information quickly and efficiently, just as he’d been taught. “Where am I?” he asked next. Emotions could wait.

“You’re in the Manor. Your bedroom.” Batman’s voice is even. This is a practised answer.

Dick cracks a humourless smile. “Nice try. This isn’t my world.”

Dick can feel Batman’s gaze on him, but he continues to stare at the thin blanket covering his lower body. He wonders what answer they’ve devised. Dick’s been in parallel universes before, most of them not very pleasant. It’s always a matter of time before everyone’s true colours show through the façade, and that’s what he’ll wait for.

“You’re almost right,” Batman says finally. “This *is* your world; it’s just the wrong time. Judging from your reaction to Jason, I’d say you’re somewhere between five to seven years in the future physically and mentally. But all the tests we’ve done show that you’re of this world.”

At that, Dick glances up with a frown. Had he not already been bracing himself for looking Batman in the eye, his eyes would’ve widened at how much *older* he looks now. Just like with Jason, there are scars, albeit thinner ones – Bruce *did* have a very public persona to maintain, and large, disfiguring facial scars didn’t work well with it. There are strands of grey in his hair, hairline beginning to recede.

Dick had always told him he'd go bald from the cowl. A distant part of him would feel the glee of being proven right, but he'll never be familiar enough with Bruce again to be able to justify a feeling like that.

"You'll want to see all the reports and tests," Batman says. "That's fine. You won't trust them, though. I know you."

Do you? Dick wants to ask. What had happened to him this far into the future, that would make Bruce say something like that? Had they reconciled? He can't see Bruce taking back his words, but he supposes that Jason returning from the dead would change things.

"I want to see Jason," he says instead.

Batman's face doesn't change. He pulls out a phone from his pocket and taps a few buttons. "He's on his way."

Dick nods, turning away to face the wall ahead of him. The two of them sit there in silence. Dick wants to ask Batman to leave, because his skin is prickling with the *awareness* of Bruce being there every moment that he's sitting there beside Dick, as though he *wants* to be there, and he doesn't know what to make of it, and he *hates* the part of him that wants to talk to Bruce, to know what happened between them in his future.

But most of all, he hates the part of him that's *happy* to have Bruce there.

The door opens quietly this time, and Jason's new bulking form takes up most of the doorway. "Hey," he says. A hand goes up to do an awkward wave, and Dick can't help himself from *staring* at him, subconscious trying to find the pieces of the Jason he has in his mind's eye.

At the lack of another breakdown, Jason steps inside, nudging the door shut behind him. "Uh," he says, "you texted?"

"Dick asked for you," Bruce says. He doesn't get up from the chair, and Jason stands at the foot of Dick's bed, hands going to his pockets. "We still have some questions we need to ask. And then you two can talk."

Dick swallows down the wave of… a feeling he doesn't want to name. "I go first," he says, relieved when his voice doesn't betray any of the things that're churning around within him. "What happened?"

His eyes are on Jason, so he sees when Jason's eyes flick to Batman for a moment before they apparently come to a decision. He doesn't know what to do with the knowledge that they know each other well enough to be able to understand the other silently, communicate with a single glance. Jason and Bruce in his time were getting to that stage, to that awareness of the other that *had* to exist between a well-functioning Batman and Robin.

Jason clears his throat. "We were tracking an organisation called The Company," he begins. His lips quirk slightly as he says the name, almost as though it's a signal to someone else. Like muscle memory, perhaps, because when Dick continues to watch him without a change

in expression, his face falters, and he continues with the narrative. “We shut down their human trafficking sect a month ago, but they still had a smaller drug trafficking system that worked as a separate branch. The fuckers actually have a bunch of individual branches, but anyway, not your concern. You went undercover in my place and got caught and held prisoner for a few days before we got you out and took them down. That was three days ago.”

Dick’s surprised at how much of an answer he’s just received. That is, if this whole thing isn’t a sham created to throw him off what’s *really* happening. “I woke up like this?” he questions.

Jason’s mouth twists, and this time it’s Batman who responds.

“We found you like that, in the Nightwing costume. From the track marks on your skin, it seems to most likely have been as a result of a series of injections you were given.”

Lovely. Dick almost prefers being a rabbit over a guinea pig. “But you can undo it, right?” he says. “You said you took them down. So you have their documentation. Their notes.”

“There were…complications,” Jason says, weight shifting to the other foot, “when we were rescuing you.”

“They somehow blew up the building you were in,” Bruce cuts in. Dick can practically *hear* the glower he’s giving Jason, and he doesn’t know whether the ‘they’ used is referencing Jason, or the group they were after. “Most of the reports and formulae are gone. You’re our only living sample of the solution you were given.”

Dick shuts his eyes for a moment. “Of fucking course I am,” Dick mutters. There’s a snort from Jason, which eases how *tired* Dick feels with this whole situation already. It’s really all just an addition to the weight that’s already been on his chest since he found out about Jason.

“Now,” Batman says, shuffling in his chair. “We have questions we’d like for you to answer.”

“Stop using ‘we’,” Dick mutters. “Just say ‘I’ like a normal human.”

Jason sniggers, coming to sit at the foot of Dick’s bed. He sprawls a little, resting on arms stretched out behind him. “I think I like this version of you,” he says to Dick.

Bruce ignores both of them. “What date is it for you?” he asks.

“Wednesday,” is the first word out of Dick’s mouth, almost before he can even think. “Eighth of July. [Year*].” His internal clock has mostly never proven him wrong, and it holds firm even through time travel, it would seem.

Jason’s eyebrows rise. “Huh,” he says. “That’s like three months after I died. Sorry for freaking you out?”

“Not your fault,” Dick tells him. He finds his eyes scanning every inch of this new Jason Todd every time he looks at him, never able to drink in the sight of him entirely. It’s akin to looking through a funhouse mirror, the reflected image distorted almost beyond recognition. “I should’ve…” His voice trails off, and he shakes his head a little, mouth quirking ruefully.

Batman clears his throat. “What was the last thing you remember doing?”

It’s been seven years, Dick tells himself. *That’s why he doesn’t remember. Would* you *remember the shit you did seven years ago?* But there’s a part of Dick that had hoped he’d mattered enough to Bruce that he would remember *this* date, because the events of that day sure as hell are imprinted in Dick’s head.

But doesn’t it make sense that it would be insignificant to Bruce if he and Dick had ended up reconciling at some point in the future? He doubts Bruce remembers each time he’s fired Dick, or when Dick has run away. He’s probably just overreacting, in the big scheme of things.

“Uh.” Dick doesn’t know how to answer him without giving away things he doesn’t want to think about ever again. “I got back with the Titans from a mission in space at some point on Sunday, found out that Jay—” His throat closes up. He can’t say it. But they know what he means, so it’s fine, right?

“Hold up,” Jason interrupts. There’s something in his face that Dick can’t decipher. Maybe not fine, then. “How long were you gone?”

“The mission? We left in March.”

Dick glances towards Jason, and is surprised to see the man’s jaw is clenched hard enough to look like it hurts. He’s glaring at Bruce – Batman – with a look of absolute fury in his eyes.

“Jason,” Bruce sighs, “not now.”

“I can’t fucking believe you,” Jason spits out. “You’ve *been* there when I’ve gone off at him. And you never said a goddamn word? He has a fucking martyr complex and that I can understand but how the hell could *you* stand there and—”

“Jason.” Batman is standing, movement silent and swift. Distantly, Dick wonders how he can manage that with the sort of clothes he’s got on. “*Enough*. We can discuss this later. If you can’t control yourself, you need to leave the room.”

Jason’s eyes promise to hold Batman to that, even as he crosses his arms and looks back at Dick. Dick has absolutely no idea what the argument was about, but he knows he won’t get any answers at this moment. Clearly, it was about him, that much he can make out.

“Continue,” Batman says, nodding his head towards Dick.

“I came to the Cave to see you,” he doesn’t add any details, and monitors his face so he doesn’t give anything away, but the bruise on his cheekbone seems to throb as he speaks, “and then went back to the Titans. Last thing I remember is going and taking a nap.”

Batman gives him a disapproving look. “Those were the barest bones of events. I thought I taught you better than that.”

Dick huffs a breath. “Maybe I don’t trust you enough to tell you more,” he says. “Got any other questions? Or can I see the reports now?”

Batman looks at him for a moment, assessing him, and then stands and walks out of the room.

Dick can feel himself relaxing automatically now that Batman is gone; there's no longer any reason to be quite as vigilant as there was a moment ago. It's not that he trusts Jason entirely, but combined with the increased mental stress of having to put up a front when Batman is here? He'd take dealing with Jason being resurrected, any day. At least there's a reason for him to act out of sorts around Jason; he doesn't want to give anyone reason to think anything happened between him and Bruce.

And besides, Jason's his younger brother, despite this version of him looking as though he could easily knock Dick out without breaking a sweat.

"You hungry?" Jason asks.

Dick's head lifts up, looking directly into Jason's eyes. He could've sworn they weren't this colour before, but he can't quite recall the exact shade that were Jason's irises, and that realisation is another punch to the gut, another vivid emotion he quickly boxes up.

He'd expected this to be a typical good-cop-bad-cop routine, and so far, they weren't doing anything to prove him wrong. "Not really," Dick answers honestly.

"Tough. Come on, we're going to the kitchen." Jason stands with a stretch.

As his shirt rides up, Dick can spot countless scars criss-crossing his skin. There's one that's a long line just down the centre of Jason's torso, but before he can figure out why it looks so eerily familiar (and *wrong*), Jason's pulled down the thin sweater he's wearing and beginning to undo the various machines from Dick.

"Alfred's here?" he asks. He hasn't seen Alfred in *months*.

Jason nods. "Yeah. He doesn't know you're awake, I don't think."

Dick goes to stand, limping towards the nightstand as he waits for his body to wake up properly. He doesn't want to ask Jason for a crutch or a cane, but he knows he won't be able to get downstairs in one go without one—

"Hold on," Jason calls. "I'll grab you a stick." Jason is back within the minute it takes for the pins and needles in Dick's legs to run their course, handing him a cane.

"Thanks."

Dick follows Jason out of the room, deciding that sliding down the bannister is *much* healthier for him in his current state. He doesn't miss the huff of breath coming from the pillar of muscle that is Jason as he skips down the staircase beside Dick, but doesn't acknowledge it.

"By the way," Jason says. "There might be…other people there."

"Other people?" Dick repeats. "Like Clark?"

“Other kids.”

“Oh. Batman’s?” Had Bruce replaced *Jason* as well? He'd seemed adamant about having no partners when Dick had spoken to him (an understatement, if Dick was being honest), but he could see how Jason returning would change that. Having Jason back was an event that he couldn't even mentally process the reverberations of on *himself*, let alone for Bruce.

Jason’s face scrunches up a little at Dick’s use of *Batman*. “Yeah.”

“Were—Are they…” He doesn’t know how to finish the sentence, but luckily for him, Jason understands.

“Two out of three have been Robin,” he says, voice gentle.

Dick can’t help his eyebrows shooting upwards. “He got *three* more kids?” he says incredulously. The conflicting thoughts of *I have four siblings now* and *are these even my siblings* find their place in his head.

Two more Robins. Had Bruce really gone through two more Robins in the time since Jason had been resurrected?

Jason shrugs. “Yup,” he says, popping the ‘P’. “And those are the only ones legally tied to him. Technically, there were a whole bunch more. And what do you even consider Barbara to be.”

Dick can’t help the instant horror he feels at the thought of Barbara being considered one of Bruce’s kids. At the look on his face, Jason laughs.

“I forgot you two had your *thing*,” he says.

“Wait,” Dick says. “What?”

Jason blinks, steps faltering. “Spoilers,” he amends.

“I don’t wanna know, honestly.” Because what does something in his future with Babs mean with him and Kory? Dick’s world has been upended enough without him having to think about losing yet another anchor. “Aren’t you worried all this information is going to mess up the timeline?”

Jason shrugs. “Since it’s not magic, and from the shittonne of tests, we’ve mostly concluded that this *you* isn’t going to go back in time and replace your past self. Your past self already exists, and this you is…” he waves his hand around at Dick. “So there’s no real danger in telling you anything.”

Dick nods a little uncertainly. While it’s true that this has never happened to him – or anyone he knows about – quite in this manner, Bruce is right: he won’t trust anything they say until he gets a look at those reports and runs a few tests himself.

Alfred is standing at the stove, humming something under his breath as he stirs. Dick didn’t expect the intense wave of *homesickness* to hit him like it does; there’s a giant lump in his

chest that's slowly inching its way up to his throat, and if he doesn't do something now, he's going to start tearing up and maybe even cry a little and that'll be absolutely *mortifying*.

"Hey, Al," Jason says, unaware of the war raging within Dick. "Guess who's finally awake."

And then Alfred turns around, and his face is so much older than Dick's Alfred, but it's still *Alfred*, and he still looks mostly the same. "Ah, Master Dick," he says warmly. "Marvellous timing. I was just—"

Dick limps forward the few steps separating them and yanks Alfred into a tight hug, the cane clattering to the floor as he lets go of it. Alfred jumps a little, surprised, but his returning embrace is just as firm and steadfast as it's always been.

Dick hides his face in Alfred's shoulder, drawing back when he can finally maintain a controlled expression. "Sorry," he says with an embarrassed laugh, bending down to pick up his abandoned cane. "It's been a while. Since I've seen you."

Alfred's gaze is scrutinising, but he looks at Dick the same way he always has as he pats his upper arm. "It's been quite a while since I've seen you as well, dear boy. This version of you, anyway."

"Yeah, apparently I'm *old* now." Dick lets a cheerful grin sweep across his face, stepping over to the barstools where Jason's sitting. "Almost thirty. The *horror*."

Jason snorts. "Yeah, real shocker you lived that long."

Dick shrugs. "Hey, if B can survive."

There's a moment's silence, a beat that's *off* in the conversation, before Jason finally says, "B's too damn stubborn to die properly."

Dick files the moment away in his head, attention instead going to the bowl of warm stew Alfred places in front of him. Another wave of homesickness hits him as the smell registers; he hasn't had Alfred's cooking in *so long*. Despite the typical feeling of his body in its vigilant mode until he can be sure it's safe to relax here, Dick finds himself devouring a second helping.

Jason has to go at some point. He leaves Dick in the living room, seated in front of the couch, with a promise that he'll be back later that night. Dick finds it a little silly of himself to be so attached to one person, but he can't help the tiny increase in stress when Jason disappears.

Especially when another tiny boy comes along at around midday. He's wearing a Gotham Academy school uniform and has a generic backpack on, which marks him as a normal student, but there's something in the way he carries himself that makes Dick's brain tingle. That, and his appearance – what is it about him that's so familiar?

"Grayson," the boy says, clearly surprised but trying to hide it. "You're awake. Pennyworth didn't tell me."

"Only woke up a few hours ago," Dick tells him. He doesn't say *who're you*; he's waiting for the child to introduce himself.

Instead, the boy huffs. "Good," he says. His feet are shoulder width apart, a centring stance, and one of his hands clench the strap of his backpack tightly. He turns without another word, immaculately polished shoes squeaking on the floor.

"Wait," Dick calls. "What's your name?"

Damian spins around once again, and this time there's a heavy frown on his face. His brows are bunched tightly. Dick internally winces at the frown wrinkles he'll no doubt have as he grows older.

"Damian Wayne," he says.

Dick blinks. "So you're…" But now that he's said his name aloud, it's clear what that familiarity was: Bruce's genes. Dick can now see the traces of Bruce in this tiny face, and the echoes of Bruce's frame from photo albums reflected in this body.

"I am the blood son, yes." Damian's voice is impatient; his arms are now crossed over his chest. There's a slight accent to his words, and definitely more of a British influence than American.

Dick *really* wants to know who his mother is, but that's going to have to be a question he asks literally anyone else. "Nice to meet you," he says instead.

Damian sniffs. "I'd say the same, but it wouldn't be honest." And with that, he exits the room.

Despite everything, Dick finds himself starting to get a little fond of the prickly cactus of a biological kid Bruce now apparently has. He wonders what their relationship is like in this time. Damian had called him 'Grayson', so they likely aren't close.

The thought of that makes all the problems Dick's left behind in his own time rise to the foreground of his mind, and he pushes himself up off the couch, leaning around the coffee table to grab at the cane.

He woke up in just his socks, and has been walking around in a borrowed pair of slippers that looked like they'd fit him. Now, he grabs the slippers in his spare hand (he'll need them for when he's wandering around the freezing Cave) and steps lightly through the hallways as he makes his way to the grandfather clock.

No one has told him that he can't be in here – if they had, then Dick would've waited until Bruce went to work the following day to sneak down into the Cave. But as it stands, he isn't breaking any rules, and Batman had told him he could read the reports. Clearly, they trust him – that either means that they're being honest and he is who they say he is (and they are as they claim to be), or they're scheming megalomaniacs and he should try to uncover their evil plots as soon as possible.

Dick's encountered the latter a few too many times to truly rule it out as an option.

There are new trophies scattered around the Cave. That horrific case with Jason's Robin outfit is still up, and it steals Dick's breath the moment his eyes land on it. He freezes there for a moment as he looks at it, wondering how on Earth Jason can *stand* it there, a permanent reminder of his death, and *why the* fuck *is it even still up? How can* Bruce *look at it, a constant reminder—*

Ah. There it is, Dick thinks. Because it's *perfectly* in line with Bruce's personality to keep it up, to serve as a painful reminder of what he probably considers his fault.

Dick steps past it, not looking at the rips and stains on the clothing. He holds his breath because his subconscious is trying to tell him he can smell blood coming from the uniform. Dick's eyes scan the rest of the costumes in the Cave. Most of them he doesn't recognise – hell, the Batman one alone is probably hundreds of versions ahead of the suit he knows – but there's one particular costume that has a familiar blue.

He can't believe he gives up the Nightwing suit he currently wears for *this*. This... this is so *boring*. The whole purpose of that suit was the tribute to his father, the unused costume that was supposed to debut in their next show. This is barely an echo of it – the blue is the only thing, really, that remains.

Dick hopes it was his own decision to change his costume this time round. Maybe it got too flamboyant – the collar he knows isn't the most practical (and the neckline means he's *cold* on stakeouts, even though the amount of skin he has out is nothing compared to his Robin days). But he's fond of that uniform, and he's at home in it in a way he hasn't been since his early days of being Robin.

And sue him, he likes the flashiness.

Dick tears his eyes away from the suits, knowing that pondering over the future when he has absolutely no context is a pointless exercise. He makes his way over to the Batcomputer, eyeing the upgrades.

Hopefully his voice hasn't changed dramatically in the last (next?) few years.

"Computer, show files for 'Grayson, Dick'. Codename 'Nightwing'."

"Voice recognised: Nightwing," the computer says.

A series of windows open; Dick knows that older files will show if he prompts the computer to do so. There are a variety of reports and documents that show up, including the usual

patrol reports that he writes, reports from the rest of the family when he's joined them on a case, medical examinations.

There are files that are locked, and some little inaccessible voids that he feels like the Dick of *now* might know the contents of. He doesn't go in to check, because at that moment he finds what he's after. Whatever thing his future self (or Bruce, more likely) might be hiding can wait.

There's a separate folder titled with the date, his civilian initials, and a few other letters and numbers that Dick takes to mean something to Bruce now. Bruce in *his* time… Dick can remember their entire filing system because it's been drilled into him so thoroughly, but it's definitely changed since then.

Dick first pulls up a medical report. It gives a thorough overview of his body and his current condition, all of which he already knows. There's nothing particularly *different* about it, nothing that would suggest magical tampering. His bloodwork is the only part that's of interest.

It'd probably be dismissed by most doctors and medical practitioners, but because Bruce isn't most (and because Dick has been *de-aged*), he did extensive examining of the slight change in Dick's blood.

The main issue, from what Dick can see, is that the serum in his system has interacted with it on an infinitesimal scale, the change too grand to reverse-engineer it without at least a basic understanding of what the formula was. Batman, it seems, doesn't yet know what the purpose of the serum even was, or whether or not this was intentional or a side-effect.

Dick moves on to the reports of the rescue. He'll have to backread and get to details on this group later. Batman's system of filing reports is intricate to the point of tangled and obscure, but it's relatively simple to find the documents he's really looking for.

He looks up Jason, because Jason has confirmed he was there, and finds other shorthand in place of names.

RR. R-V. O. BG.

Dick would've assumed BG to be Batgirl, but Barbara… Barbara hasn't been Batgirl in a while. So unless it's a different moniker, someone else has taken up the mantle. He wonders whether this assignation happened anything like the Robin mantle, then dismisses the thought, pushing it to another corner of his mind as he continues reading.

To summarise, the vigilantes split into three teams – RH and RR, B and R-V, and BG on her own. One group came in through the roof, providing a distracting for the rest as they entered through the front door of the warehouse. As they drew all the firepower, BG travelled through the building first in search of documents, and for Dick.

It's a little bit surprising to find that Jason stated it like the first priority was finding Dick, when Dick – and the rest of them – know that the lives of civilians come first. Batman trusts them to take care of themselves; it's why they work together so nicely—

But that had been before Jason, hadn't it? Perhaps this Bruce has changed.

This is yet another thought that Dick places carefully in a different corner of his mind, a dusty trashcan of a corner, and refuses to look at it. If things continue like this, his mind's going to be insanely cluttered by the time he gets out of here.

They had found him in the basement, a large room adjacent to the science lab they had built under there. According to Jason, who had moved downstairs while B, R-V, and RR took care of the rest of the goons above, they had large vats of an odourless and colourless substance, almost like water had it not been for a thicker consistency.

Dick cracks a smile at the joke about lube.

It's strange, to be reading something that he knows is *Jason's* writing, but for it to sound so different to the boy he knows—*knew*. Jason's reports had improved in leaps and bounds, as had his English schoolwork, far quicker than any other of his subjects. The more Dick reads, the more he thinks he can see pieces of *his* Jason showing through this older, stockier man who can grow *facial hair*.

Dick's apparently finally getting to the interesting parts of the report, because this is when the sentences get choppier, the detail to certain areas drawing away what he feels is Bruce's attention from the parts where there's less elaboration.

For instance, the events that led to the explosion of the building and the destruction of all the vats of liquid, and all the documents and devices in the building, is possibly the most convoluted wording he's ever seen in a report.

Dick thinks it's Jason's way of flipping Bruce off, and the thought of that makes him smile.

He's just started looking for the reports of BG when he hears the sound of a clearing throat somewhere behind him. It's only years of Batman doing the same to him that stops Dick from jumping. His heart leaps in his chest as it is; he's glad he doesn't show any visible signs of being startled.

Dick glances behind him. Despite having braced himself for it, he almost flinches at the sight of Bruce with the full Batsuit on, cowl up.

Jason's trailing behind him with two other people that Dick doesn't know.

"Time for patrol already?" Dick asks, subtly leaning his weight off his bad leg and onto the counter.

"When I said you could read the reports, I didn't mean come here yourself and read them." Batman's voice is chilly.

"Then you shouldn't have made is so easy for me." Instead of waiting for a response, Dick nods towards the rest of the group who have gathered around the Cave. "Do I get introductions?"

Jason's the one who speaks this time. "That's Tim. He's Red Robin now. And that's Cass. She's Batgirl. They're the kids I was telling you about."

"Batgirl, huh," Dick says, a million questions flitting through his head.

Cass is tiny when standing beside Jason or Batman, but taller than Tim. She'd probably be taller than Dick, too, although that isn't saying much, considering Dick's body is built completely to suit acrobatics. Despite the confidence in her body, the way she walks and holds herself, that marks her as dangerous, there's a wide curiosity in her eyes and something *open* about her that makes Dick take to her almost before she even speaks.

"Barbara gave it to me," Cass says simply. There's no way she could've known just how those words would affect Dick, but they do, and her smile becomes a tad shyer, a lot more relieved, at something she sees in him. "She says hi, by the way."

Dick's smile is genuine now, albeit small. "Tell her I say hi back, if you see her before I do."

Tim had walked around the rest of them to the Batcomputer as they'd spoken. There's a constant stream of keys being tapped by Dick's ear, much faster than Bruce's. There's also a constant stream of Tim muttering under his breath that Dick imagines has definitely earned him a glare or ten from Batman at one point or another.

Sounds echoes *spectacularly* in the Cave.

"Huh," Tim says suddenly, straightening.

His back cracks with a series of sounds, and Dick winces a little as he turns to look at the screen from where he's standing. Tim has brought up a bunch of police reports and transcripts from calls they've received lately.

"What?" Bruce comes over instantly, and the two of them hunch over the keyboard in almost the exact same position.

"A bunch of people have called 911 claiming they or someone they know has been de-aged," Tim says.

Bruce is still skimming through the rest of the information that Tim has just summarised. He taps a few keys, the locations of each call being sent to the Batmobile.

"There are nine of them," he says. "I'll take Robin. The rest of you, pair off. We need bloodwork." Turning to Dick, he adds, "Your time here might've just gotten cut in half." He probably means it to be reassuring.

Dick doesn't know how he feels about that.

Chapter End Notes

* Specifying the year is a whole new library of trouble that I'm not even going to think about lol

Events referenced are from The New Titans (1988) #55.

I have a very brief outline plotted right now so the posting schedule is going to be whenever I have a chapter's worth of writing done. I also don't quite know how long this is going to be, because the outline is still incomplete. This is probably the most unplanned I've ever been going in to a chapter fic so fingers crossed I don't write myself into a wall =D

Thank you for reading!! Let me know what you think and feel free to come chat on tumblr ^~^

Chapter 2: II

Chapter Notes

Firstly: I am. So incredibly overwhelmed by the response?? To this fic????? Thanks to everyone who read, kudos-ed, commented, bookmarked, subscribed!!! I hope you all enjoy this chapter ^~^

Warnings: Mentions of child abuse, more graphic than the previous chapter. Drug use and drug dealership.

I feel like I should also say that I'm not bashing Bruce in this story. This isn't a "Bruce is a bad parent and we're cancelling him" fic. My intention is to show Bruce acknowledging what happened and actually dealing with it and Dick healing. (That being said, the characters will have reactions that are hopefully according to their personality in light of anything they find out throughout the course of this story.)

I have also decided that this story continues on from *if the stars we wish on (disappear into the night)* and this is set about six months after it. No need to read that to understand this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's been a while since Jason had worked with the rest of the family on a case like this, something that required long stake-outs and researching, nights of hacking and following money trails. They'd been after The Company for *months* now, and Jason is ready to shoot someone in the face.

Bruce and Damian have left, getting a start on patrol, and Tim and Cass are poring over the list, pulling up as many faces and details as they can in the next hour so they can go door knocking. Jason has busied himself cleaning his guns, but really, it's a way to scrutinise Dick without seeming overly obvious about it.

He's strange, this version of Jason's older brother. Bruce can attribute the subdued personality to grief over Jason's death all he likes, but there's something else that Jason can *feel* is off with him, and he intends to find out what it is. Part of it is out of a morbid sense of curiosity, questions that have been lingering in the back of Jason's mind ever since he found out that Bruce had apparently kicked Dick out of his home *and* taken Robin from him in one fell swoop; but there's another part of him that genuinely wants to help Dick stop looking like stepping in someone's shadow will bring on the apocalypse.

And, of course, there's that *other* part that knows *he* would've been the one who got reverted to a younger self if Dick hadn't jumped in his place without telling the rest of them, and he

can't help the guilt and how responsible he feels for making sure Dick comes through this in one piece.

Especially not after their botched rescue.

"Oi, Dickface," Jason calls, knowing the nickname will be familiar, "you just gonna sit there looking pretty all night, or are you gonna come help?"

Dick's gaze had snapped away from the Batcomputer to Jason at his words, and now he immediately jumps to action as he steps closer. Jason waits for a reaction to his weapons of choice, and is only half disappointed.

"Guns, huh," Dick murmurs. He pushes himself up to sit on the benchtop, cane resting against the leg of the bench. "Bet he loved that."

Jason snorts. Does Dick think that his use of guns is a rebellion strategy? Because… while he's not *completely* wrong, it's a little funny for his motives to be minimised into something so *childish*.

"He's learned to accept it," Jason says with a shrug.

Dick nods, accepting this. His hands are methodical as they clean and check each piece, slow from lack of regular practise.

"That from the mission?" Jason asks, nodding towards giant bruise covering a massive chunk of Dick's face.

Interestingly, Dick freezes before there's that plastic look on his face that he's been wearing ever since he woke up. "Yeah," he says, turning his head a little so it's no longer as visible to Jason as it was before. "Same as when I got this." He lifts his leg slightly, hands not faltering in their action.

Jason hums a little. He isn't sure *why* he wants to know so bad – they have accidents during training all the time, and patrol can go a whole range of ways – but there's something about it, and Dick's behaviour, that he can't quite put his finger on. Something eerily familiar.

"So you've seen the reports," he continues. "You trust us now?"

"Trust you enough to give you an unabridged version of the last week?" Dick asks. "Maybe."

"What I don't get is," Jason peers into the chamber, frowning a little before continuing, "why you stopped sending reports to the Cave. We pretty much carbon dated you, y'know, and I went and checked the records and there's nothing there, even though it's one of B's biggest *rules*," he huffed a little, mostly for show so Dick, *this* Dick, would know how he felt about Bruce's rules, "and there's no mention of your entire space trip."

Jason himself only sort of knows what he's getting at, but it's interesting to see the reactions in Dick align with what he's assuming.

“I, uh,” Dick clears his throat. “We had a falling out, when I went to see him after I found out about you. There are actually a lot of reports I don’t think I filed in the Cave’s system, even before that trip.” There’s a bitter quirk to his mouth that makes Jason think there’s more to this story.

Jason snorts. “And here I thought child death made relationships stronger.”

He regrets it the moment he says it, because Dick *flinches*, and there’s a naked grief in his face as he stands up, whirling around to finally face Jason.

“*Don’t* talk about it like that, like it meant nothing just because you didn’t stay gone. I don’t know how you came back or when, and maybe you and he think I’m overreacting about it, but—don’t talk about it like it was a *ploy* for him to make the rest of us still alive *closer*. You think *Batman*, the most emotionally constipated person we know, would take you—” he chokes a little on the word and then obstinately goes around it, “what happened to you as a way to make bonds *stronger?* This is fucking *Bruce* we’re talking about, who still has that damn *case* up, not—” He waves his hand around a little, evidently at loss for an example of someone more attuned to their feelings.

Jason listens to this outburst without a word. Frankly, he's a little surprised Dick feels so strongly about it, but then again, he *did* only find out about Jason a few days ago. He just doesn't know if that's all there is. Bruce didn't handle his death well, he knows, even though he hadn't ever been interested in the details.

Finally, he says, “He kicked you out,” and the way Dick’s face goes blank and loses some of its colour confirms his words. *Fucking Bruce*, he curses, because this would have to be the second time he’s done so to Dick.

Dick doesn’t say anything, but his breathing picks up. “Why would you think that,” he says, the words barely audible.

Jason looks at him for a moment, hoping this will be a step forward and not infinitely backwards. “There was a weird case a while ago, and you told me then that he pretty much fired you as Robin and kicked you out.”

Dick doesn’t deny it, and all of a sudden, Jason’s eerily aware that Tim and Cass are still in the Cave, probably doing their best to be as quiet as possible and not interrupt them. He wonders just how much of this they know about, whether they knew any of it. And *then* he feels a wave of guilt hit, that this conversation is happening in such public a place, where there are cameras accessible by anyone in the family.

He shouldn’t have brought any of this up here. He should’ve waited until after patrol, when the rest of the family had gone to bed or disappeared into their individual nooks.

Dick sits back on the bench. “So I guess we got closer after you came back,” he says flatly. “It makes sense. I had – *have* – a fucktonne of regrets.” He huffs out a humourless laugh. “Jay, I—”

The abrupt shift in conversation to *Jason* now makes him blink a little, and all of a sudden the sheer discomfort hits. He doesn't want to hear Dick's apologies, his regrets. It prickles at his skin in the same way that that *look* on Bruce's face does sometimes, when he knows that the other man is seeing someone who's no longer there.

He holds out a hand, stopping Dick. "Look," he says, grimacing, "I get that for you, I died like yesterday, and you're grieving, et cetera, but can't you save all this shit you're about to unload for when I come back in your proper timeline?"

Dick snorts a little and mutters something under his breath about hypocrisy. But despite it, Jason can't bring himself to wish he could take back his words, because he *really* doesn't want to hear them, to be confronted with Dick's grief.

"Uh," Tim's voice sounds from the other end of the Cave. He stops a little as Jason and Dick turn to face him, Dick chewing his lip with a fervour that grosses Jason out. When Tim stops a little, Cass nudges him forward from behind, and Jason can only guess that Tim lost the round of rock-paper-scissors for who had to interrupt the two of them. "We have pretty much everything we need."

Jason nods, leaping from the bench and stretching slightly. "Great." He doesn't have to look to know that Dick's following him to the computer.

Tim's now in his element, having gotten past the awkwardness. Jason has the urge to pinch his cheeks. "They're all from the lowest socio-economic areas of Gotham," he begins, and already, Jason knows how this story goes. "Most don't have family or aren't in contact with them, and don't seem to have very many close friends. The calls to the police were either from their roommates or friends whose place they were couch-surfing at."

"Does it say anything about where the cops are holding them?" Jason asks, squinting at the screen. Regardless of whether he needs glasses, he knows that *Tim* will sooner rather than later if he keeps reading pages of notes like this with such fucking tiny font.

"They released them all," Cass says from Jason's other side. "Probably not enough resources to hold them, and no reason to."

"Figures." Jason leans back from the computer. "So, blood samples?"

Tim nods. "It's early enough that most probably won't be asleep," he offers.

Jason checks his supplies for empty test tubes and syringes, confirming he has enough. "I'll head out, then," he says. It's past time he normally leaves for patrol, and tonight he'll have to put it off a little longer to get round to make these house calls. Jason grabs his helmet, calling out behind him, "Send me the addresses."

Tim mutters something behind him that sounds a lot like *asshat*, and Jason flips him off without looking.

Before long, Jason's driving out of the Cave. He hears the sound of a tiny *ping* as the addresses come through, and he opens them up on his GPS.

Jason's brows furrow as they all show up in his section of Gotham, and then the *anger* sets in: someone's out there fucking around in *his* territory, messing up the lives of the people under *his* protection. It's one thing to go after Dick – that's always a risk in their line of work, even if it wasn't meant to be *Dick* – but it's another to get innocent people caught in the mix.

It's a change to be knocking on a door, particularly when Jason isn't anticipating a fight from the other side. It's a grungy neighbourhood, made to look worse by the flickering lamps that are the only light source. Bikes are chained to porch pillars, as opposed to going down a few blocks and seeing them strewn around on front lawns. Jason gets hissed at by a cat as he peers around.

The door opens slightly, chain still holding it in place. Jason can make out a teenager on the other side, baggy hoodie and bare feet. Jason takes off his helmet in an effort to be more approachable, standing only in his domino mask.

"What're you here for?" comes the overly fierce voice. "I haven't done anything, I swear—"

"Calm down, kid," Jason says. "You're not in trouble. I'm here to help." Remembering the state of Dick's memory, he adds, "I work with the Batman."

There's a pause, and then Archie's voice comes in, a little incredulous. "You work with the Batman?"

"Yeah. 's why I have this." Jason opens up his jacket a little, showing off the red design on his chest."

"How come I've never seen you round before, then?"

"You've gotta know by now that you aren't in whatever year you think it is." Jason raises his arms slowly. "I'm only here to listen to whatever you last remember and see if you need anything, a'ight?"

The door closes, and then Jason hears the sound of the chain jingling before it reopens fully and Archie stands to the side, giving Jason permission to enter.

Jason hates entering houses with his shoes on, especially his work boots – who knows what he's tracking in? – but he hates the thought of being caught barefooted even more. He wipes them as thoroughly as he can on the wiry doormat before following Archie.

Archie leads Jason into the kitchen. The entire room (and house) is plain, the only splash of colour the bright tablecloth with sunflower patterns. There's a dying plant on the countertop, and a stack of dirty dishes in the sink. Breadcrumbs litter the tiny counter space beside the sink, and there's a used knife with bits of butter on it still laying there.

"Geez, kid," Jason says. "I get you got thrown in the deep end a little, but at least take care of the place."

Archie eyes him critically. "Look, man, I don't know you, and looking at your life choices, there's no way I'm taking *advice* from you."

Jason exhales a long breath. “Point,” he says. “Now, care to tell me what you remember?”

Archie shrugs. “Nothing outta the ordinary. Woke up. Went to school. Came home, did my homework, went out with a couple friends. Got home when it started raining. And then I went to sleep. It wasn’t anything memorable.”

Jason grimaces; he’d hoped for something more useful. “What year is it, for you?”

“[Year],” Archie answers.

“So you’re about a fifteen years into the future," Jason says, mostly for his own benefit. "Which you’ve probably figured out already.” Jason gets out a notebook and pen, scribbling down a couple of numbers. “Do you have a phone?”

Archie hesitates. “The landline’s been cut off.”

“Have you seen something that might look like this?” Jason pulls out his phone, thin and black.

Archie tilts his head at it, disappearing into the house. A moment later, he re-emerges with a smartphone. “It was plugged in,” he says. “It said it was charging.”

Jason nods. “Yeah,” he says. “It should last about a day or so before you have to recharge it. Can I see?”

Archie hands it over wordlessly, watching as Jason fiddles with it and then takes out a smaller device from his pocket to break through the password barrier.

“Set a passcode you’ll remember,” he tells Archie, turning it around. He watches as Archie types out six digits. “Great. It’s pretty simple to use, so I’ll let you fiddle with that. I’ve made sure you have unlimited calls and texts.” Jason slides over the notebook. “The first number is mine. Call me if you remember anything, if you need anything, all that jazz. I’m serious. Even if you think it's unimportant. Maybe you shit purple that day. And the second is if you can’t reach me.”

He knows Cass won’t mind Jason giving out her emergency line.

“Thanks,” the boy says, taking the sheet of paper and eyeing the digits on it. He folds it and puts it in his pocket, to Jason’s relief.

“Don’t worry about rent or food,” Jason says. “I’ll cover those and someone'll bring you groceries. And try not to leave the house.”

"What, like a sugar daddy?" Archie says, but there's relief in his eyes.

"Yeah," Jason says in deadpan. "The fucking Batman is your new sugar daddy. I need a sample of your blood, by the way."

“What for?” Archie’s instantly suspicious again. Frankly, Jason would’ve been worried if he hadn’t been.

“To see if we can find whatever it is that made you like this in your system,” he says.

“You can fix me?” Archie asks. It’s the first time Jason can *see* how young he really is. “Send me back?”

“I can try my best,” Jason says honestly. He pulls out a syringe and test tube, nodding Archie over.

Damian isn’t happy. Bruce can tell that much from how he’s been stewing this entire drive into Gotham. Damian isn’t *talkative* the way Stephanie and Dick, and even Jason, had been, but he’s never normally this quiet.

Before, Bruce would’ve let him stew, telling himself that if Damian really had something to say, he would go ahead and say it. But now, after over a year of therapy sessions, that doesn’t sit well with him.

“Is something wrong?” he asks, voice rumbling with the Batmobile’s near silent engine.

“Of course something’s wrong,” Damian snaps. “Grayson is a *child*. Why aren’t we tracking down the others affected by this and fixing him?”

Bruce should’ve guessed. He exhales, taking his time to go over his words before he responds. “We still need more information on them,” he tells Damian. “We can’t go in there with only police reports and addresses. And we have a responsibility, too. We can’t let the rest of Gotham suffer.”

Damian’s scowl deepens. “So we should let Grayson stay like this, because a few thieves and __”

“Damian,” Bruce interrupts. “We aren’t letting him stay like this. The rest of the family are out following up on the leads, and we will be as well after one sweep through of the city.”

Damian isn’t entirely satisfied, but he doesn’t say anything more, and the rest of the drive into Gotham is as quiet as it had been before Bruce had spoken.

It’s not that therapy has fixed everything. But it’s helped more than Bruce had expected it to. He’d only gone in to begin with to convince Jason and Tim to see a therapist. They had stopped a few months in, now only appearing sporadically – or so they had said – but Bruce had maintained his weekly (and often bi-weekly) sessions.

The beginning had been frustrating; if it hadn’t been his deal with the boys, then Bruce would’ve probably quit two weeks in. He’d been to therapists before, as a child whose

parents had just died, as a pre-teen displaying asocial behaviour, as a late teen with a penchant for getting into fights. But this time was different: for starters, he'd made sure it was someone trusted both by Bruce and the League. He'd told her his identity, and it was surprising how much of a difference that made.

Bruce stops the Batmobile, and he and Damian exit the car fluidly and silently. They grapple to the rooftop of the nearest building, landing with only the barest of sounds. As Bruce gazes out, looking at the Gotham skyline, he allows all the lingering thoughts of Dick and their open cases to fade into the background of his mind, breathing in the dingy air freely.

"Father, come," Damian says impatiently. "We haven't got all night."

Batman's lips almost smile, and he follows Damian.

Damian is apparently under the impression that the quicker they finish patrol, the sooner they can track down their leads. Bruce doesn't correct him, knowing Tim will get to him with the necessary files and information in the next half hour or so.

There's a deal going on in an alley below. Bruce pauses on the rooftop above, shielded by the shadow cast from the neon sign that flickers dangerously. Damian settles beside him, tiny body poking out farther than Bruce's needs to in order to see.

"Should we interrupt?" Damian murmurs.

"Depends," Bruce says, taking out a tiny device from one of his infinite pockets. He positions it on the ledge in front of them, aiming it downwards to catch the rest of the conversation between the dealer and client.

"…really summat special, love," comes the sleazy voice of the dealer. He's got a cigarette in his mouth, and from the sound of his drawl, it's likely he's drooling around it. "Jus' fer you, 'cause yer such a special client o' ours."

"What is it?" A female, though you wouldn't know it from the massive coat she has on with the hood drawn up. There's no way to determine any recognisable features or body shape. One of them will have to follow after her, if this really is the beginning of another drug trafficking organisation trying to sink its claws into Gotham.

The dealer shrugs. "Depen's," he says, letting out a cloud of smoke.

Damian wrinkles his nose, burrowing his face deeper in his hood. Bruce can't blame him – the wind has blown the smoke directly towards them.

"On what?"

If the audio quality from the cowl recording is good enough, then perhaps they'll be able to track her by her voice. It's very gravelly, the sort that comes from being a chain smoker, and has a husky quality to it.

"It'll give ye the time o' yer life. Whatev'r that means f'r ya." The man chortles a little.

There's a pause, where Bruce thinks that maybe she won't accept the deal, will go off with whatever is in the bag he's given her. And then she nods and Bruce exhales out of his nose, mouth a grim line.

"Gotta take it here," Bruce hears, drawing his attention back to the scene at hand.

It isn't unheard of, for dealers to make a demand like that, but it does make the deal a whole lot shadier than it had been before.

"Why?" she asks, but she's already opening her mouth and popping it in.

Bruce can't make out what the drug looked like; he'll have to go over the cowl footage later and hope it's distinguishable. Damian shifts beside him, moving his weight off one foot and onto the other, but is otherwise silent. Bruce has to hand it to him – this time a year or two ago, he would've been gnawing at the bit.

"'s not fer everyone," is all the dealer will say. He leans against the wall, watching as she takes the pill and swallows it dry. "You g'nna be with anyone?" he asks, seemingly casual.

She shrugs. "Maybe." Handing him over a small envelope, the woman tugs the coat tighter around her. "Thanks," she says, before walking away.

The dealer stands there for a moment, going through the contents of the envelope. Then he takes out a phone from his pocket and types something. Bruce, aided with his enhanced cowl, can hear the *whoosh* as a text sends.

"Robin," he says. "Follow the woman. See where she goes and the effects of the drug. We may have something new on our hands here." It was best to keep as on top of things as possible, particularly when they'd been so busy with The Company lately. It was time to see what new horrors Gotham had concocted while their attention had been elsewhere.

Damian complies without a sound, a rustle of wind the only indication when he grapples to the adjacent building.

Bruce stays where he is and watches the dealer. He waits in the alley for another ten minutes, finishing the cigarette, and then he heads in the opposite direction of the woman. Bruce follows him silently.

"Batcave," he says into his comms.

"Yes, Batman," Alfred responds.

"Agent A," Bruce says, a little surprised. It's Cass' night off, but he supposes that they all want Dick back as fast as possible. But that doesn't mean he won't make her take another night off this week. "I need you to run facial recognition from the cowl cam."

"Of course, sir." Alfred is silent for a moment or two as the software does its job, and then he says, "The quality of the image is too low to be certain, but there are three potential results. Any information to narrow it down?"

“He’s dealing drugs,” Bruce says bluntly, knowing that Alfred will understand the sort of criterion that might also suggest. “About as tall as me, and a British accent. West Country.”

“Then you’re most likely following a Mr Lennon Doyle, sir,” Alfred tells him. “Born in England, moved to America as a child when his parents migrated. They moved around the country depending on Mr Doyle Senior’s work in marketing until his mother died and they settled in Gotham.”

“Thanks, Al,” Bruce murmurs. He can’t see Alfred’s expression on the other end, but he imagines it’s the same thinly veiled surprise that it’s been ever since he began verbalising his appreciation.

Bruce wants to ask Alfred whether he’s seeing things, or if this really does feel like another operative of The Company. He doesn’t entirely trust his own judgement on this, not so soon after they took down the organisation, especially not when so many of their documents were lost. Not for the first time, he grimaces at the thought of how that last mission had gone down, with all of their emotions far too involved for anyone to be making rational decisions.

Bruce still doesn’t know the entirety of what happened, because the story that Jason and Cass have told him is far too solid for it to be true.

“Batman,” Robin says through the comms. “The woman went straight home and proceeded to fall asleep.”

“Alright, Robin,” Batman says. “Good work. Watch her for another few minutes, then resume patrol. I’ll join you shortly.”

The only response Bruce receives is the click of Damian’s comms unit, indicating that he’s flicked it off.

Bruce trails Doyle until he’s at his house. Doyle has lit another cigarette and stands on the porch as he finishes it, the smoke the only movement in the night.

Batman drops down in front of him from the roof, and Doyle leaps backwards, cigarette flying to the ground.

“Jesus,” Doyle gasps, back against the wall and a hand over his heart.

“Lennon Doyle,” Batman says. “I’ve been following you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Doyle bends to pick up the cigarette, but Bruce steps on it with a heavy boot and crushes it beneath his heel.

“Who’s your supplier?” Batman growls, taking a step forward.

“Look, ya got the wrong guy!” Doyle’s voice is now a squeak, and he keeps glancing nervously at the door beside him as he speaks. “I don’t know nothing!”

“I’ll decide that,” Batman says. “Tell me about the drug. The *special* drug.”

“I-I can’t.”

“They’ll kill you?” When Doyle nods, eyes round and wide and a little watery, Batman takes another step closer. “I’ll make sure you have protection from them.”

Doyle shakes his head. “Look, I just got one more round to do, an’ then I’m done. Or they’ll come for me, an’ *them*.” He jerks his head towards the house.

“Tell me about the last round,” Bruce says, “or you’ll find me even less agreeable than your employer.” He accentuates his words with another growl, letting the light fall on him to show Doyle the tips of the ears on his cowl. People always seemed to be afraid of those.

Doyle’s breathing picks up, and he says, in a shaky voice, “Like I said, I don’ know much. The days they wan’ me ta work, they text me an address in the mornin’, and ‘round noon there’s a delivery of the goods.”

Bruce stares him down, and Doyle looks away before he mutters something.

“I didn’t catch that.”

“There’s a name, too,” Doyle repeats. “On the delivery. Started week or so ago. Says that certain clients d’serve to be given special deals.”

“You’re given names?”

Doyle nods. “They’re all regulars, people who’ve been buyin’ for months.”

“What if they say no?” Bruce questions.

“No?” Doyle frowns, as though surprised by his query. “Why would they?”

Bruce can think of at least ten reasons off the top of his head, but he knows what Doyle is insinuating. They work a relationship with their regular clients in order to be able to do this. That, and specifically targeting certain people based on their mental health and support networks.

“What does the drug do? Does it have a name?”

Doyle shrugs a little. “’s called Aqua. S’metimes they call it Jailbait. No clue what it really does; they give us a line ta say ta sell it,” he says. “They jus’ want confirmation the client took it, an’ tha’s it.”

Bruce looked at him assessingly for another moment, watching Doyle sweat.

“’s that all you wan’ed?” he asks.

Bruce only nods his head once. “You and your family will be watched,” he says. It’s both a threat and a confirmation of protection.

Bruce sends Damian home at the usual time, but he himself stays out longer. He doesn't want to admit it, but he's avoiding the Manor and the Cave alike.

He's avoiding Dick, because something about his son at this age and with eyes haunted and grief heavy sets off something deep in him that Bruce has kept buried ever since Jason died. He doesn't want to confront it. He wants to keep ignoring it and hoping the situation will fix itself, despite those two things being specific emotions he's been working on to stop doing.

It's around five in the morning when Bruce heads home. The Cave is mostly empty at this hour, which he'd been hoping for.

Tim's the only one still down here, a row of blood samples in front of him. He's got his head down over a tablet, and he doesn't look up when Bruce enters.

"Tim," he greets.

"Bruce," Tim says in the same tone.

Bruce pauses at the out of character response. "Everything alright?" he asks, instead of questioning about the results first.

"Fine," Tim replies shortly.

Bruce waits another breath to see if Tim will say anything more. When the silence continues, he asks, "The results?"

Tim exhales a long breath. "Same as Dick," he says. "So small no one would normally pick it up."

Bruce leans closer. "But now we can begin working on an antidote."

Tim shuffles a little. "We should be able to," he says. "But there's a chance that it's irreversible. Or that trying to fix it will cause more harm than good."

Bruce refuses to accept that. "We have to try," he says, and Tim nods, still not looking at him. "Have you gotten sleep?"

Tim's forehead crinkles into a frown. "Don't start," he says, but where those words, uttered by Tim regularly whenever Bruce asks him this, would normally be light, they're now snappish.

"Tim," Bruce says, gentle but firm. "Get some rest. I'll read over your notes and keep—"

"I'll go to bed when I want, Bruce."

“I’ll call Alfred in if I have to.”

Stay calm. Don’t yell. Get him to understand first, and only resort to more extreme methods if that doesn’t work. Whatever you do, don’t get angry and shut him down. The words are like a mantra in Bruce’s mind, and they come more naturally to him now than they did even a month ago.

“I told Alfred I’d go to bed once I’d finished analysing the bloodwork entirely.”

“I’ll help, then,” Bruce says steadily. “That way we can both go to bed.”

Tim doesn’t respond, but he doesn’t tell him to go away, either, so Bruce picks up another tablet and finds Tim’s notes. As he skims through the familiar shorthand, he can hear Tim tinkering and typing across from him.

“This is good work,” he says. *Always praise them. Praise shouldn’t be impossible to attain, especially not from their father.*

Tim normally beams whenever Bruce compliments him, but this time he just twists his mouth a little. The two of them work in silence, methodically going through each of the samples and recording their findings. It’s repetitive work, and Bruce allows himself to get lost in the analysis.

“That’s the last one,” he says finally, straightening from the bench. The next stage is up to the computer, and it'll at best take a couple hours.

He raises an eyebrow at Tim, but instead of an eye-roll, Tim’s face is carefully neutral as he begins to pack away the equipment. Bruce doesn’t bring up the matter of sleep, instead joining Tim.

“Did something happen on patrol?” he asks.

Tim shakes his head. “No.”

“Your friends?” God knows Tim’s lost enough people that this sort of question is necessary.

“Everyone’s fine. For the most part, anyway.”

“Tim.” Bruce waits until Tim turns and looks at him. *Make yourself approachable*. Bruce leans against the bench so he’s even slightly nearer Tim’s height. “Please.”

Tim’s eyes are looking anywhere but him now, and his fingers are twisting the cuff of his sleeve viciously. “It’s… hard to say.” He takes a couple deep breaths, like he's forcing himself to calm down.

Reassure them. “That’s okay. Just start somewhere.”

“Don’t tell Dick that I know, okay?” Tim says in a rush. “This one *and* our one.”

Then he leans past Bruce and types something, commands on the Batcomputer that are faster than Bruce's eyes can follow. And then he's gone, and the Cave is empty with the exception of Bruce and the bats.

Bruce looks at the screen, frowning. Tim brought the Cave's camera logs, but these date back *years*… Realisation strikes him, and Bruce sucks in a breath, pressing play on the particular camera recording that Tim has opened.

It's the day that Dick said he visited the Manor.

Bruce doesn't stay in the Manor. Instead, he takes one of his more conspicuous cars and goes on a drive, finding himself an hour later parked in a dead-end road on a detour towards Gotham. There's grass everywhere, all around him, which is probably why he, even subconsciously, chose this spot.

It's nearing six in the morning, which is what Bruce is waiting for. He sits there, mind completely empty, as he wonders just how he's going to fix this. Whether he *can* fix this.

No wonder Dick's been acting so skittish around him. It's a wonder he's still letting Bruce in his life, after—

But Bruce has studied too much psychology to not know the answer to that. Children are quick to forgive and excuse parents, often justifying it and shifting the blame to someone or something else. Often shifting the blame to themselves. Victims can't always leave, because of the form of emotional abuse. And the thought that perhaps the only reason Dick is still in his life is due to a chain of emotional and physical abuse makes him nauseas.

Bruce stares at the phone in his hand, the screen displaying his contacts list. She told him he could call her whenever he needed to, but Bruce has never taken her up on it.

But their appointment is days away, and this can't wait. It's not about him, anymore.

That had been one of the most important things that Sarah Cassidy had told Bruce. *It's not always about you*. It had seemed simple to Bruce, in the beginning, because what sort of a narcissistic, arrogant fool would he be to think that? No man is an island, and all.

It went a lot deeper, as it turned out.

Sarah picked up just as Bruce is contemplating hanging up and perhaps going to the office or even the penthouse. He has computers there that are connected to the same network as the Batcomputer; he'll be able to work on the results when they finish in about a half hour.

“Bruce,” Sarah greets, her voice solid and anchoring. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Sarah,” Bruce responds automatically, etiquette ingrained in him. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“You know I get up much earlier than this,” Sarah says easily, and Bruce can picture her smiling as she speaks. “What’s up?”

Bruce hesitates. He doesn’t know how to say this, to verbalise what he did, to acknowledge it to others outside of the safety and barriers of the Cave walls. If he says it aloud now, then it’ll be in the open, and he’ll *have* to face it.

And then he thinks about Dick, about how he deserves a better parent than Bruce has been to him, and he takes in a breath.

“I did something,” Bruce clears his throat, “to my eldest. Actually, I think I did a lot of things, but it’s specifically about this one thing.”

One of the things he's liked about Sarah since their first session is that she isn’t afraid to push him into speaking. It’d been something that a lot of the therapists he’d seen before hadn’t quite gotten, that balance between listening and demanding that works for *him*. Maybe it comes with the territory of working with superheroes. Maybe it has to do with the knowledge that Bruce is Batman. Or maybe it's that he'd actually given this particular go of therapy a real chance.

This time she waits, and Bruce is glad, because he can feel a vice grip around his chest. Everything he tries to say comes out defensive; even without intending to, he’s trying to justify his actions, and he hates himself for it.

“This particular incident happened when he was about nineteen,” Bruce finally says aloud. “I —” *Hit him. Punched him. Threw him out of his home and told him to never return.* Bruce can’t say it. He has never felt more selfish.

After a whole minute of silence has passed, Sarah says, “What are the facts, Bruce? Lay out the scene for me.”

Batman takes over, more or less. “It happened a few months after Jason died. I was…” Another minute or so of silence as Bruce tries with increasing frustration to not say *I was in a bad place* or *I wasn't coping well* or even *I didn't remember it exactly until I watched the recording because those few months were a haze.* He won't allow himself to minimise this with excuses.

“Bruce, say it however it sounds. I am not here to condemn you.”

“That’s easier in theory, Sarah.”

“I know.” There’s a shuffling sound from the other end of the call before it fades. Bruce knows that Sarah does yoga in the morning after she wakes, and he imagines her attempting

to find peace and tranquility as he tells her about how he's a child abuser. “What about in writing? Write it down and read it out to me, if you don’t want to send it.”

It feels like taking the easy way out, and Bruce doesn’t want to take that. He wants – *needs* – for this to be painful for him, for it to *hurt*, for—

Penance? Is that what he’s looking for? Is that what he feels is more important than making sure he’s can help Dick and ensure that this never happens again?

Bruce gets out a writing app on his phone and proceeds to type out the series of events, a jumbled jargon combining both current and past happenings. It’s so unlike him to be *messy* about writing, when it’s one of the things he’s meticulous about to get details down in a precise and orderly manner. He normally *hates* written documents like this.

Bruce clears his throat. “Alright,” he says, and begins reading.

Chapter End Notes

~~I can't believe I've really buckled myself in for a giant fic in present tense what was I thinking~~

Thanks for reading!!! I'm v iffy about this chapter and the plot advancement is about the only thing that I'm okay with lol so let me know your thoughts ^~^

Classes also begin from Monday and I have no idea how this semester is going to be (we're like,, three quarters online? I would like? to Drop Out?) so updates might be slow

Tumblr

Chapter 3: III

Chapter Notes

> things i predicted that might hamper my ability to churn out chapters: school, the ongoing pandemic, creative brain going offline, lack of time
> things i really Did Not predict: taylor swift's eighth album being released with absolutely no warning and wreaking havoc on my ability to do anything but listen to it
>
> Warnings: more mentions of child abuse, references to drugs, blink and you'll miss it reference to non-consensual sex
>
> i hope you guys enjoy this chapter 👀

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Manor is asleep now, the only time it truly ever sleeps, but there's an irritating itch in Dick's leg and his brain is tiredly buzzing just a little too much for him to join them. After lying in an unfamiliar bed staring at a ceiling that contains new cracks to explore, Dick finally sighs and slides out from beneath the sheets.

Dawn will break in about ten minutes or so. The room he's in right now is apparently his own – he doesn't know what happened to his for him to move, but he's noticed that there have been other minute changes to the Manor's infrastructure, things that aren't typical to a normal renovation.

For one thing, the floor plan, of all things, is the tiniest bit different, as though the Manor has literally been rebuilt.

The aesthetic remains the same, though, and there's still something about it that feels like *home*. What Dick wants to do (has wanted to do for the last few days, really) is go and sit under Bruce's desk like he's done so many times in the past, to draw comfort from the feeling of solid oak around him, the cushy high-backed chair blocking the only real entrance to his spot.

He hasn't tried to hide under there since he was fourteen.

Dick doesn't know anyone here, not really, so he can't say for certain which areas of the house are going to be deserted enough for his current mood. Instead of picking a destination, he leaves his room and picks a direction to walk in.

Despite the probable recreation of the Manor, the creaky floorboards are still the same ones. Dick can hear Jason's voice in his head, scoffing at the unnecessary expenditure it would have taken to redo something so precisely, and he digs his nails into his palm until the vice grip around his chest releases.

Dim lights in the hallway stay on overnight in the inhabited parts of the Manor, but here, in the branching wings, the air is still and dark. Dick trails a hand along the wall as he goes, and no dust comes off.

If he keeps going straight, he'll be nearing the greenhouse, where he once spent a whole summer recognising various plants by touch alone. Dick takes a turn, and stumbles down a different passage.

Dick's in a living room now. Even if he'd had memories attached to it before, they fade at the ones this room is drenched in. There's a TV screen standing atop a cabinet with shelves stocked messily with gaming systems and DVDs. Two discs sit with the shiny side up atop the cabinet. One of the walls is entirely a bookcase, the bottom half stacked with board games. They're mismatched - if there'd once been an order to them, it's gone now, sorted most likely by popularity alone.

Speakers are placed around the room; the surround sound in this place must be great, even though Dick knows that Bruce has a theatre that's better than anything they could do in here.

There's something so *lived in* about this room that Dick, after a moment of silent studying, turns and walks back out, retreating down the hallway.

The wall is full of portraits. Dick is used to the portraits and paintings around the Manor, accustomed to how the more public parts of the house have the *expected* artwork for someone like Bruce, all of the professionally taken photos that indicate and show off wealth and status. Dick's least favourite wall in this place is the one with all the creepy commissioned paintings of Bruce's ancestors.

The fact that he has a least favourite wall is something Jason had found in equal parts hilarious and horrifying.

This wall is probably the opposite of that. Dick's eyes linger on the first photo, a simple frame around what's very obviously a candid photograph of a massive group of people. Dick recognises the Kent farm in the background, and he can see all the additions to the family he's met, but there are so many more faces that he has never seen before.

Then there's a photo of… a group of animals. A cow, a dog, a cat, and… Dick squints at the giant red creature in the background that didn't quite make the shot. He blinks at it, and then shakes his head and moves on. He'll save that particular question for the future, maybe. He already has so many.

Tim and Bruce on the courthouse steps, Tim's face so much younger than the person wandering around in the house now. Cass and Bruce on the courthouse steps, Cass' smile shy but bright. Dick's breath catches at the one with Jason and Bruce, and he hurriedly shifts his eyes from Jason's haunting grin. This is the first time he's seen this photo outside of newspaper headlines.

It may have been painful to look at Jason's face, but the way his breath stutters in his lungs when his gaze land on the final photo in this little cluster isn't any better. Because this time it's *him* and Bruce.

Dick focuses on his own face so he doesn't have to look at the document in their hands. His face hasn't changed much, and it seems like he's had his last growth spurt, but his smile reminds him of his mother and he can't stop staring.

And then he flicks his eyes towards Bruce, at the genuine happiness on his face, and he wonders what changes. Because he can't physically conceive even the mere *thought* of Bruce ever speaking to him again, let alone adopting him.

How do you come back from a fissure like the one they now had? He doesn't know what he would do if Bruce called him the next day, apologies spilling from his mouth and wanting to make it up with him, telling Dick it was a mistake and he would never do anything like that again and that he understands how Dick feels because he lost Jason too and of course—

Dick jerks his gaze away from the picture frame and continues down the hallway. He doesn't look at the remaining photos, the colours flitting past him through the corner of his eye.

He doesn't know how long he walks, taking turns at random, but then he passes by a giant window and sees the sunlight streaming through it. It's now well past dawn; Alfred, he knows, will most likely be getting up now. His schedule has been the same for as long as Dick's known him. He doesn't know what it'll have to take for Alfred to not be the first person to wake, and he doesn't want to find out.

"Grayson."

It's Damian Wayne, the tiny copy of Bruce. Dick hope his face doesn't look as tired as he feels, and tries to smile.

"Good morning," he greets him.

"Good morning," Damian responds shortly. His posture is absolutely textbook, spine straight and arms at the small of his back. "Pennyworth said to tell you to come down to breakfast if you're hungry."

Pennyworth. Dick has never known anyone – especially not family – to refer to Alfred like this.

"I'll be right there," he says.

Damian turns without another word and disappears from the room. His footsteps are quieter and more measured than most assassins thrice his age, and Dick wonders yet again.

He only pauses to wash his face in a bathroom, gargling water to get rid of the musty taste in his mouth. His eyes are red from being up so long. Dick doesn't look at the mottled side of his face.

In the kitchen, it's only Alfred and Damian. A cat is stretched out on a sunny windowsill by Damian's elbow.

"Morning, Alfred," Dick greets.

“Good morning, Master Dick,” Alfred says. “I see you have not slept.”

Dick smiles in lieu of response, and takes a seat a few down from Damian. Alfred places a plate in front of him, and there’s an array of breakfast foods on the counter. Dick picks a couple of pancakes and pours maple syrup over them. He glances beside him to see Damian methodically eating his way through a pita bread and hummus.

“Would you boys care for tea?” Alfred asks. He’s already got a teapot and cups set on a tray.

“Only if you have some with us,” Dick responds, just like he always does.

Damian’s hand stills for a moment, but Alfred’s smile grows fond.

“I think I shall,” he says.

“None for me, thank you, Pennyworth,” Damian says. “I left Drake to monitor something from last night that I need to check on.”

Alfred’s eyebrows rise. “Finish your breakfast before you go, Master Damian,” he tells him. “If Master Timothy is asleep, it would be best to give him a few more minutes.”

Damian glares down at the plate, and Dick senses that the only reason he isn’t speaking his mind right now is because *he’s* here.

“So, Damian,” he says, “you go to school?”

“Yes,” Damian responds tersely.

This is going to be a harder egg to crack than Dick had anticipated, but that’s not going to stop him from at least making small talk with the kid. “What grade are you in? Gotham Academy, right?”

“Ninth grade. And yes, Gotham Academy.” Damian’s short responses can’t hide his obvious disdain for the school.

Finally, something Dick can *work* with. He lets out a low chuckle. “Yeah, I never really liked it there either.”

Damian frowns, obviously not believing him. “You told me that school is good for me and that I needed to spend time with my peers. And Father says you were in practically every club there was.”

That draws Dick up short. “Uh,” he says, mind short-circuiting a little bit. And then he does the mental maths quickly – if Damian is about fifteen right now, then the Dick of this time is around a decade older than him. Maybe he’d gotten less cool and more *adult-y* about school when he got older? “School is good for you. And I liked clubs. Those were cool. And some of the classes and teachers and kids. But other stuff wasn’t as fun.”

Damian makes a low clicking noise and stands abruptly. His plate has been entirely wiped clean. He places it in the dishwasher and heads off.

Dick watches him go, taking small bites out of his last pancake.

“You’ll have to forgive Master Damian,” Alfred says. “He’s taking your predicament hard.”

Dick frowned as he sopped up the last of the maple syrup. “I didn’t think we were close,” he says. “He calls me *Grayson*.”

He can’t see the look on Alfred’s face at his words, but when he straightens from placing his own plate in the dishwasher, Alfred is heading into the living room with a tray in hand. Dick hastens to follow.

“That’s just Master Damian’s way,” he explains. “It’s not a reflection of your relationship. The two of you are… extremely close.”

There’s a lot that Alfred isn’t telling him, and Dick doesn’t know if it’s because the future is too complicated to explain, or if it’s another matter. He accepts the teacup from Alfred and is content to sit there in the sunny living room as they talk.

Damian’s pace speeds up as he nears Tim’s room. He rarely goes in here, but recent events have made it a sort of meeting space for them. Jason isn’t in the Manor consistently enough for them to invade his room, and Cass is an absolute nightmare before noon, so Damian has, against all reasoning (except the reasoning he has) chosen Tim’s.

He doesn’t bother knocking, knowing Tim will most likely be asleep.

So it really isn’t his fault when he has to duck the flying batarang at the last minute, the weapon embedding itself into the doorframe a metre above his head.

“*Drake*,” he snaps, pulling it out and tossing it back. “*You* were the one who wanted the truce. And your aim is *terrible*.”

Tim had begun apologising since he’d realised who it was. He catches the batarang out of the air when Damian throws it back, tucking it under his pillow. He’s sitting in bed, pillow upright against the headboard. There are two laptops open in front of him and a stack of papers littering every surface – even the ground – within arm’s reach.

“I thought you might be Bruce,” he says, rubbing a hand over his face.

Damian frowns. He has no idea what his father did to annoy Drake now – probably sent him out of the Cave to go to bed – but he dismisses it entirely. They have more important things to be worrying about now, like fixing Grayson.

“Have you gotten up the monitoring devices I asked for?” he says.

Tim yawns massively as he taps a few keys on one of the laptops and then slightly tilts it in Damian’s direction.

It’s still past an absolute sea of paper, and there’s an open packet of biscuits there too. Damian would like to stab whoever didn’t teach Drake how to be *tidy*, because now he has to carefully tiptoe to actually get to the laptop that’s plugged in to about three *other* things, one of them probably being a charger, and the other a hard drive that sits whirring at the foot of Tim’s bed.

He thinks Tim dozes off by the time he actually makes it to the device.

The screen shows a few different camera angles. There’s a street that’s rapidly filling up, from the doorway of an apartment. Another shows its inside lobby. The last is a camera in the elevator of the building.

“Has anything interesting happened?” Damian asks, even as he flicks through the few hours of footage that Tim has recorded.

“Um,” Drake mumbles intelligently. “I don’t think so? I know she hasn’t appeared on any of the cameras again.”

Damian huffs impatiently. “Move,” he mutters.

“Get your own spot,” Drake mutters, turning over and burying his face in a pillow. “It's my bed.”

Damian ignores him and wriggles until there’s magically space for himself in the tiny little nook that Tim is occupying. It’s warm in the bed, and the urge to just fall asleep suddenly becomes very present in his mind. Damian ignores it, sitting as forward as he can until Tim elbows him in the stomach for dragging the sheets off of him.

Watching security cameras is *boring*, but it has to be done. His father told him that they needed to watch this woman, to be on top of Gotham’s drug scene, and Damian knows that he won’t be allowed to focus on Grayson’s predicament until he completes this task and turns in a decent enough report.

Not that Damian doesn’t care about drugs in Gotham. He just cares about Grayson more.

And he doesn’t like this younger version of his oldest brother, who only smiles when someone’s looking and says things he’s *supposed* to but doesn’t really mean, who doesn’t know Damian and speaks to him like he’s any other kid. And then sometimes he acts like the *real* Grayson, and it somehow makes things even worse, because it's the illusion that he's back but he *isn't*, and Damian...

He had hoped that Drake would have the same issues, hence a mutually beneficial partnership, but it seems like Tim is too busy moping around about something or another. It’s fine, though; Damian is used to working for Grayson’s best interests alone.

He sits there for about half an hour, position going from a straight back to slumped against the sleeping backside beside him. Occasionally, he takes his eyes off the laptop screen to glance around the room.

Damian's probably spent the least amount of time in here, for obvious reasons. Personal rooms tend to be for when they need to be alone. A closed door means *do not disturb or fucking else*, and he assumes the others also adhere to this unspoken rule (unless dire circumstances call for dire action).

He's a little unsure of what exactly constitutes as a dire situation, because only last week, Drake had burst through Cain's window because he was out of peanut M&M's.

Damian knows, from when he'd catch glimpses of the room back when Tim was still Robin, that the posters that are up on Tim's walls have been there since before he left. There are a whole bunch of some band called *The Clash*. A few animated elves and mythological creatures dot other spaces. There's one promoting a Young Justice reality TV show.

Like everyone else's rooms in the Manor, there's a giant bookcase along one wall and a desk to accompany it. Tim's desk is stacked with papers and other strange strewn bits and pieces that will eventually be made into something or be scrapped in the bin right beside it.

"Y'r elbows are f'ckin' pointy," Drake hisses from beneath Damian's elbow.

In Damian's defence, he'd thought that Drake was far more asleep than he evidently is.

"Your side flesh is weak if it can't stand my elbow," he counters, but relieves the pressure a tiny bit. It won't do to aggravate Tim, not when he's using his laptop for his monitoring.

"Side flesh?" Tim repeats, sitting up a little.

"Why aren't you still asleep," Damian snaps.

"Because you keep *poking* me and moving around." Tim lets out a massive yawn. "Anything interesting happen yet?"

Damian shakes his head, eyes on the screen. Then he glances at the clock, because he has school to attend, and Drake will most likely kick him out when he has to leave for WE.

It's seven in the morning. Damian still has about an hour or so.

Damian watches the faces of people on the street walk by. The woman – Stella Winston – lives on the third floor; chances are she'll take the stairs down rather than waiting for the elevator.

Handfuls of people head out, each walking their individual path. Damian watches as some hold the door, while others are in too much of a hurry to notice. He finds himself watching a stray cat lingering on the street just by the alleyway entrance, no doubt hunting for scraps.

And then the strangest thing happens, because a young girl walks out of the building. She's older than Damian – probably in her late teens. A lot of people her age have left since

Damian came into Tim's room to watch the feeds, but this one draws his attention.

"Drake," he says. "Can you ID her?"

Tim stirs from beside him, and his fingers work on the keyboard as though they're separate from his brain. "You even have to ask?" he murmurs, voice a thin croak.

If Damian had been paying more attention, he would've thought that Tim had been getting allergies, judging by the way his eyes and nose are red. The colour isn't as obvious on Tim's brown skin, but it's still a notable difference to its usual shade. Besides, his eyes have that watery look about them that Damian associates with hay fever.

"Um," Drake says after a moment. "Either we're onto something, or both of us are sleep deprived."

"Why," Damian says with a frown, more a demand than an actual question. He leans closer to the screens. "You think she's the same woman?" It all clicks now. "The drugs?"

Tim nods. "We won't know for sure unless we can question her and be *entirely* sure."

"Todd is in Gotham," Damian says.

"So's Cass," Tim mutters. He's flicking through his phone. "Wait, it's like seven in the morning. Never mind. Jason it is."

Damian waits impatiently, watching the cameras even though there's little point now. If they're right, then this might fix Grayson. They might finally be able to create an antidote to reverse the effects of the serum he was apparently injected with. Damian has never been more relieved to have followed instructions, though he suspects this isn't going to be a recurring feeling.

"He's on it," Drake says, finally hanging up. "She lives like fifteen minutes away from him. He'll update us when he has more information."

Tim falls back against his pillow, but his eyes don't close. He stares up at the ceiling, and the only movement that comes from him is his chest as he inhales and exhales deeply. Damian recognises a meditation technique when he sees one.

He's about to get up and this time leap across the horror of a workspace and onto the hardwood floor, when Tim speaks.

"I didn't think about what *he'd* be like, y'know?" he begins, and Damian freezes. He doesn't want to talk about Grayson with *Drake* of all people, but he's rooted to the spot. "Like. I became Robin because Batman needed one. But I was only seeing half the picture. I didn't think about shit like… what happened *before* I got there. Fuck, I didn't think about Dick and how he was a real person and that *Bruce* was a real person outside of Batman and that of course it would've impacted *them* as well and now I can't stop thinking about—"

"Drake," Damian snaps. "You aren't making a *lick* of sense. Shut *up* and maybe stop trying to think. Grayson will be back in no time and then it won't matter."

Tim turns around onto his stomach, burying his face in the pillow. He doesn't seem to care about the layout of the bed as the sheets scatter the pages, despite the number of times he's yelled at Damian for moving something the tiniest centimetre.

"Of course it's gonna fucking matter," he says, words mostly incoherent. "It never *stopped* mattering. I—"

"Todd is *alive* now." Damian has no idea what Drake is on about, and he's mostly just annoyed at him for wasting Damian's time. "Once we get Grayson back, all the grief will be —"

Tim, who had been shaking his head at Damian's words, comes to a frightening still, as though he's just realised something. "Of course," he says mechanically, head lifting in an effort to not have to breathe and speak through the thick pillow. "You're right. I'm being dumb. We'll get Dick back and it'll be okay."

Damian is seconds away from *gaping* at Drake, because… *what?* When has Drake *ever* given into something so abruptly, particularly to *Damian?* It makes no sense, just like Drake hasn't made much sense all morning.

Damian suddenly can't stand to be in this room anymore. He didn't *need* this right before—

And now he's running late for school.

"You're obviously sleep deprived," Damian says. "If you continue behaving strangely, I'll have to tell Father or Pennyworth."

He stands from the bed, making sure to spill as many documents from the bed onto the floor as possible as he gets up. Next time he needs help, he's going to wake up Cain no matter how many knives she throws at him.

Alfred has left to drop Damian off to school and pick up a few groceries by the time Bruce returns home. He skulks into the Manor like a teenager sneaking back home after a night out, taking the long way to his office from the garage.

The trip becomes even longer every time he avoids a hallway filled with the more personal photos hanging on the walls, because right now Bruce can't look at those.

He makes it to his office without running into anyone. Once he gets there, he fishes out his phone and sends a quick email, saying that he'll be working from home today.

Bruce needs to fix Dick so he's back to his normal age. It's the only thing he can focus on right now, because there are so many thoughts swirling around inside his brain about *this* Dick, the one that's probably asleep right at this moment, so many regrets and questions about what to do next, that he would be at a standstill if he didn't focus on a relatively fixable problem.

It really says something about their lives, Bruce muses, that his easiest problem to solve right now is his de-aged son.

With that thought comes the more intrusive ones, like *it's only a problem because you made it one* and *if you'd been better this wouldn't be happening.*

Bruce firmly shuts the lid on those as tightly as he can, because as true as they may be, they aren't helping. Then he opens up the reports from patrol, gathering all the accounts of the age regressed individuals that the rest of the family followed up on.

After about half an hour of reading through them, Bruce has to stand and pace for a bit, because they're all the same. No one remembers their present (future?) selves – they only remember who they are at their current age.

Nevertheless, Bruce writes up his observations based off the reports and files it. Then he opens up the analysis of all the bloodwork. This is the thing that he's placed all his hopes on. If this doesn't show even the slightest hints of something, then they're at a dead end once again.

Bruce first skims through the document, eyes scanning each line methodically. There *is* something… it's the same discrepancy that they found in Dick's bloodstream. The software has a list of suggestions explaining it, but those are all based off of known formulae. For all they know, this could be entirely new. Bruce refuses to sacrifice any lives before they find the correct one.

There's a ringing over the intercom on his office phone. Bruce holds down the button.

"Yes?" he says.

"Master Bruce," Alfred says from the other end. "Need I remind you that breakfast was five minutes ago?"

Bruce's stomach does a flip to remind him exactly how it feels about food, but Bruce tells Alfred he'll be there anyway. Regular meals and a decent amount of sleep are both things he's agreed to maintain at all (most) costs. Food wasn't too difficult, just a matter of drinking less caffeine and eating more solid foods. Sleep is another matter altogether.

So instead of skipping breakfast like he would've done before, Bruce puts his computer to hibernate and heads towards the kitchen.

He's just in time to see the tail end of Tim's jacket as he flits out of the room, and something akin to a stone sinks into Bruce's gut. It's not unexpected, though. Of course Tim would be avoiding him, after what he's done. He has no reason not to.

“Master Tim was running late,” Alfred says, jerking Bruce’s gaze away from the door. “He says he’ll only be at the office until Master Jason relays some findings to him, though.”

Bruce nods, sitting on a barstool. “Did he say what Jason was looking for?” Alfred the Cat lifts his head from where he’s lying on the windowsill, and Bruce absentmindedly scritches his tiny head. The tiny feline begins purring at a volume that rivals their ricecooker.

“He’s chasing up the woman Master Damian followed last night,” Alfred tells him. He sets down an omelette in front of Bruce, pouring hot coffee into a mug that’s half the size it was a year ago. “Apparently, they believe she has also regressed in age.”

Bruce’s head jerks up at the sound of that. “*What?* And they didn’t tell me?”

“They probably wished to confirm their suspicions before doing so.”

Bruce can’t deny the logic in that, but his skin itches to be following up on this woman as well. But no – he trusts his team. He trusts them to do this as well as he could’ve, or even better. It’s more efficient to work on the antidote based on the blood sample, though the process could be quickened with a few samples from this woman.

Bruce fishes out his night phone, and quickly makes a call to Lennon Doyle, the drug dealer. “Doyle,” he says in his normal voice, knowing that the phone will automatically output it in Batman’s growl.

There’s shaky breathing from the other end. “One sec'nd,” Doyle says in a fluctuating voice. Bruce waits impatiently, hearing the sound of a door squeak open and then close. “Batman. I haven’ done anything, I swear, ya have t—”

“This isn’t about that,” Bruce interrupts. “I need to know whether there are any other names. Other people you’ve been told to give the special drug – this *Aqua* – to.”

“No,” Doyle responds. “No one. They don’t give out a list o' names. It’s just the one ev'ry time. And that was my last job, I told you, so they won’ be contacting me no more.” His voice has developed a pleading note to it.

“Do you know any other dealers? Anything about them at all?” Bruce isn’t naïve enough to think that there aren’t many, many more people in the lower levels of this operation.

“Uh…” Doyle mumbles a few more *um’s* and *ah’s*. “Quentin. He lives five blocks from me. It’s against protocol to know the others, but last month there was a mix-up or somethin', and all his supplies were delivered t' me.”

“What’s his address?”

Doyle rattles off an answer, before finally saying, in a hesitant voice, “Is that all?”

Bruce hangs up.

He shoves the rest of the omelette into his mouth and grabs the coffee, placing his plate quickly into the dishwasher. He needs to drop by this address, before the day properly begins.

Bruce hates to admit it, but he thinks his displays of threat this morning may have been a bit over the top, a way of expunging the tensions of the morning. It doesn't matter, though. Soon, the analyses of the drug he's just gotten his hands on will come through. If Tim and Damian's hunch is correct, then they might have a solution to this before the day ends.

And even if it isn't, then at least they have a sample of Aqua.

Bruce isn't as careful heading to his office as he was when he got home the first time. His head is too busy putting together an internal to-do list, to find some way of casually prompting Jason to hurry it up with his information.

He's only just turned the corner to head down the final hallway to his destination when Dick emerges out of a door to the left. Both of them jerk to a halt, and Bruce doesn't know whether Dick's heart has begun racing like his just has, but he can tell by the look on his son's face that he wasn't expecting Bruce to be here, and it isn't a pleasant surprise to be running into him.

Not that Bruce would expect otherwise.

His mouth is dry when he opens it to speak, because Dick is still standing there like a deer caught in the headlights, like he's just been found somewhere he wasn't meant to be, and Bruce is ready to do *anything* to wipe that look off his face because it's *his* fault it's there and he *hates* it—

"Dick," he says, effectively halting the useless track his thoughts have been running in. "You've been down for breakfast?"

Dick's face is as neutral as it's ever been, and his voice is cautious when he responds. "Yeah," he says. "With Damian."

Bruce nods, as though this is the imparting of some incredibly valuable information. "We might've cracked the case of your age regression," he offers, grasping at straws for something to say.

"Yeah?" There's an actual sliver of emotion in Dick's voice now, instead of that blankness that he's been addressing Bruce with since he woke up.

Bruce nods. "You shouldn't be standing for so long, with that leg." He jerks his head a little. "My office?"

Dick hesitates only for a moment, but in the end he nods. Bruce leads the way, walking a tad slower so there's no need for Dick to speed up or risk falling behind. This little acquiesce is

something so basic, so inherently built-in to some people, and yet Bruce had only realised a little while ago that he tends to walk off and leave others to follow.

He tries not to do that, anymore.

He opens the door to his office, and sunlight immediately streams out of the room and into the hallway, brightening it with natural light. His office is cosy and warm now, on chilly mornings, but in summertime, and during sunny afternoons, it's an absolute oven.

Bruce doesn't lead them to the desk and the chair by the corner. That would feel much too formal, and he doesn't want Dick to feel uncomfortable – or rather, increase the discomfort he's obviously feeling. Instead, he sits in one of the armchairs around the coffee table laden with stacks of paper and reports, and Dick warily takes the one closest to the door.

He's left the door ajar so Dick won't feel trapped in there, but he doesn't know how well that's working, considering the way Dick's gaze flits around the space before focusing purely on where he's placing his feet.

"We think it's related to a new drug circulating Gotham," Bruce begins, going right to the point. "I have a sample downstairs now being analysed for its chemical makeup, so we can begin testing it. Tim and Damian have Jason tracking down a lead in the city. They think a woman Damian was following last night who had taken this drug has regressed in age."

Dick blinks a little, and he leans back into his seat. "That's… different," he says. "Have you tracked down the dealers? Who wants to change their adult *paying* customers into late teens?"

Bruce hums in agreement. "There's obviously a different endgame that we haven't uncovered yet. The dealers I've questioned have both been too far down the ladder to know much. We have a few leads we can follow, but they're thin at best."

Dick squirms in his seat a little. His fingers are fiddling with a slight bump on the hooked part of his cane. "So you can work out an antidote to change me back?"

There's something else beneath this that he isn't asking, but Bruce answers the question as honestly as he can. "We're going to do our best," he says.

"And if it doesn't work? What then?" Dick's eyes don't look at Bruce; they go through him, probably fixed on the far wall.

Bruce shrugs a little. "Then we'll work with what we can," he says. *Gentle voice. Calm hands. No sudden movements*. "Dick…"

"So, what," Dick interrupts him, almost as if he didn't hear Bruce, "I'll just live here, in the Manor? Tell the world I've had some magic facelift and that's why I look younger? And an accident at the same time and so I forgot the last, like, seven years?"

"Dick," Bruce says slowly, after he's given Dick a chance to speak. *Don't speak over them. Don't invalidate any of their concerns.* "If you really are here, aged as you are now, you're

—”

No, he can’t say that without first addressing *why* Dick would feel like he isn’t welcome. Saying something like that, about Dick being welcome at the Manor, about him always having a place in this family and in Bruce’s life, will likely only tip Dick off that Bruce is completely aware of his past actions. And that would beg the question of why Bruce hasn’t brought it up, why he hasn’t apologised.

Bruce takes in a breath, and begins again. “I need to apologise to you.” Simple. No complicated words. Blunt and to the point. “I…” he wishes he’d practised this, that he’d figured out the best way to say this so the extent of his feelings would be clear, but it’s too late now, “I remember. That day, when you came to see me after you got back from the mission.”

If Dick had been looking skittish before, it’s nothing compared to how his hands clench around the handle of the cane, the way his body goes completely still. His chest barely rises and falls; Bruce wonders distantly whether he’s holding his breath or if it’s just shallow enough to not be noticeable.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, “for everything I said. I didn’t—my words and actions were rash. I should never have said any of that to you. I should never have,” his throat closes up for a moment but he swallows around it, plowing through, “laid a hand on you.” There’s an audible intake of breath, but Bruce is unsure whether it’s from himself or Dick, because Dick is still a perfect statue seated on the leather couch. “You’re always welcome in this house. In this family. I have no right to dictate your place in it. That’s what I was trying to say, before. That if you’re stuck here permanently, you don’t have to w—”

There’s no warning before Dick gets up and leaves the room. He barely uses the stick in his hand, striding purposefully out the door. Bruce barely has enough time to process this before there’s another figure rushing in.

“Ja—” Bruce doesn’t get the word entirely out before he’s being yanked up and thrust up against the wall.

“I can’t fucking *believe* you.” Jason’s voice is furious, his eyes flashing green. “He told me you’d kicked him out of the house, but to *hit* him?” Jason’s voice rises the longer he speaks. “How the hell can you stand being so self-righteous and parading around taking down petty criminals and going after abusers when you’re the same goddamn thing? I’ve given him so much shit for being a faithful lapdog, but no fucking wonder. You’ve *beaten* it into him.”

Bruce doesn’t even try to fight against his grip, or say anything, because he knows that everything Jason is saying about him is right. After a moment, when Jason is clearly still holding him in place waiting for an answer, he says, “I’m trying to fix things.”

Jason lets out an incredulous laugh. “Yeah,” he says. “*Fixing*. That’s all you ever do, isn’t it? Yell at us, do whatever the fuck you want, and then when everything’s settled again you come in with some rambling apology that’s mostly just a stupid explanation about how you were actually right, and then some shit about how much *family* means to you, and then you expect everyone to forgive and forget.” He makes a disgusted noise, letting go of Bruce and moving

back, like he doesn't even want to be touching him. "I don't care what your fucking intentions are. If you *ever* touch Tim or Damian or Cass, or *Dick* again, I will come for you."

Bruce doesn't try to say that he would never, that the incident with Dick had been a one-off thing, because what reason does Jason have anymore to believe his word? He's broken any sort of trust he ever had with his kids.

But he can't just say nothing. "I won't. I promise you, I will never touch them – *you*, any of you – in a harmful way." He runs a hand through his hair, thoroughly drained. "You have no reason to believe I mean it, or that I'll keep my word, but…" What *can* he say, to show the weight that this has on him? "I will spend the rest of my life making it up to Dick, even if he never forgives me—"

Jason is suddenly shaking his head. "No, see, that's another thing. Dick would forgive you *anything* you do to him. If you go to him the second he's back to normal and open your fucking heart up and apologise, he'll lap it up and believe you and you'll think everything's *fine* and then never bring it up ever again, and then maybe a month or a damn *week* down the track, we'll hit our next big crisis and you'll fall back into old habits again. It's like I said. You do the same goddamn thing over and over again and we just keep forgiving you because," he waves his hands around, movements jerking and jaw clenched, "maybe because we're all desperate for parental figures or something else absolutely pathetic. But you," he shakes his head, turning away a little so Bruce can't see his face anymore, "you keep dragging us all here and abusing that power that you gave yourself when you decided to take us all in. Someone should've stopped it *years* ago, but now *I'm* stopping it."

He's breathing a little hard now, and has to stop for a moment to calm himself.

"Like I said," he says, voice suddenly as even as it's ever been, "if you don't clean up your act, I'll make sure you can never hurt them again. Whether that means taking them away, or taking you away." And then Jason turns to leave, but when he gets to the door, he stops and says, over his shoulder, "The lead checked out, by the way. Tim's downstairs working on a way to age Dick back up."

"I'll be there in a minute," Bruce says, but Jason leaves before he can catch Bruce's words.

Bruce sinks back down on the chair. He's never felt nearly as devoid of absolutely everything as he does right now. Because the only reason Jason's words struck so deeply is because he's *right*. Bruce falls back into the rut he's created for himself when he was younger and more prone to emotional outbursts and displays of headless anger.

He can think of all the times he let rage cloud every other emotion he felt with just Dick alone, and the number racks up to far more than it ever should've been allowed to get to. All the times he yelled at him after Dick had been hurt on a mission or patrol, because of the fear welling up in his gut. The times he avoided the boy's bedside when he was injured or sick because he couldn't bear to feel helplessness and it was easier to give in to the anger and go out into the night with his cowl.

Bruce remembers the extremes, with Dick, the times he's fired him after various injuries because he couldn't bear to deal with it and wanted Dick as far removed from him as possible

so Bruce and Batman's lifestyle didn't hurt him. And then he thinks about incredibly thoughtless that had been, how he'd been so focused on his own emotions and needs that he never once thought about Dick's beyond the physical ailments.

Part of Bruce doesn't even want to send Dick back; this is a chance to *fix* things. Dick at nineteen could just stay here and Bruce could raise him all over again and it would be *better* this time, because *Bruce* is better this time, or trying to be at least—

Even before that train of thought leaves the station, Bruce already knows that there's absolutely no way he could ever do that. For starters, there's no way the rest of his kids or Dick's friends would ever let him do that, just because he feels *guilty* at the way he's treated Dick. The Dick who belongs to this time deserves to have a life; Bruce has never been as proud of anyone as he's proud of him. He can't – he *won't* – take away agency like that and force Dick to grow up all over again and diminish all the things Dick has achieved, all the relationships he's built, the *life* he's had.

Bruce finally takes a breath and looks up at the clock. His face feels itchy and raw, like one does after a long crying session, but his eyes are dry and empty. The relief of tears aren't a luxury he will allow himself, not for this.

The clock shows that he's been sitting here in silence for fifteen minutes. Bruce pushes himself up and heads down to the Cave to see what Tim's concocted so far.

Tim, Jason, and Cass are in the middle of a heated discussion when Bruce enters the Cave. All three of them glance up in unison when they hear his footsteps, glancing at each other before apparently coming to a decision.

Jason walks to the back of the Cave and Tim coughs awkwardly before he starts fiddling with something on the benchtop; Cass has evidently been chosen as the spokesperson for the three of them.

"The analyses are almost ready," she says, "but we need medical assistance on alert."

Bruce frowns. "Why?"

The rest of them still sometimes have tics that'll come out when they're in a place they trust to be somewhat more open, but Cass' have all been manufactured, little mannerisms to put people at ease and throw professionals off-guard. It's when they *don't* show up that Bruce knows something's up.

"It's probably unlikely we'll get him at the exact moment he turned back," she tells him, "but there's a chance he'll be heavily injured if we do."

Tim speaks before Bruce can question farther. "Bruce," he calls. "Take a look at this."

Bruce carefully files the little tidbit in the back of his mind and focuses on what Tim's showing him.

Dick hadn’t really had a destination in mind when he took off, but now he finds himself in the attic, high in the rafters and shaking like a leaf. He doesn’t understand it; he was *fine* after the initial shock had worn off, and he was fine when he’d gone back to the Titans, and he hadn’t even really had *nightmares* or anything, beyond seeing Jason die over and over. What is it about this that made him react like that?

He regrets telling Tim to leave him alone after the kid had followed him when he'd run out of Bruce's office, because he would love for something to distract him, and he’s also a little bit stuck up here because his leg *really* hadn’t taken kindly to the way he’d bolted and climbed to get to this particular spot.

Dick cautiously swings himself down from the beam and onto a more comfortable junction, landing on his good leg with the ease of constant practise. He can already feel the utter humiliation of the way he’d reacted to Bruce’s words, but he can’t even figure out a way to apologise to Bruce, because every time he thinks back to their talk, his mind seizes up.

He can’t even process Bruce’s words, let alone think of a way to address them. Now all that’s left is hoping that they’ll find a way to put him back to the time he’s supposed to be in so he doesn't have to deal with this newfound problem.

The sun is high in the sky and Dick is beginning to swelter from the heat when there’s a little knock on the trap door.

Tim’s head pokes up a moment later. “Hey,” he says awkwardly. “I know you said you wanted to be—”

“No, it’s fine,” Dick says, a smile automatically plastering itself onto his face. “Were you after something?”

“Yeah, uh,” Tim crawls up fully into the attic, and Dick drops down onto the dusty hardwood flooring to meet him halfway, “you, actually. We’ve found an antidote.”

Dick’s eyebrows rise before he can stop them. Maybe something's finally going right for once. “The lead came through?” he asks. Now that he thinks about it, that’s probably why Jason was here.

Tim nods. “Yup,” he says. “Her bloodwork still had trace amounts of the drug in it, which we know now that we actually have the drug as well.”

Dick follows him down the foldable staircase, sliding down to make the process faster. “So I can just… be changed back right now?”

“As soon as you want,” Tim tells him. “There’s a little bit of prepping we have to do to make sure your blood pressure and oxygen levels are stable, but that should be over pretty quick.”

Dick finally asks the question he's half dreading an answer to. "Will I remember?"

Tim's mouth twists sympathetically. "No," he says simply. "This isn't like magic where it's your past self in this time. Technically, your now body is still here somewhere, and your current brain; it's just sort of… *not* here?"

Dick finds himself smiling genuinely at the terrible explanation. "So *I* won't remember," he summarises, "but the version of me coming back probably will?"

Tim nods. "Yeah," he says.

"Great." His future self can have all the problems he's been thrust into. Dick's just glad to be heading back into a time where he at least knows where he stands with the people in his life - or not in it. "I won't have to worry about any of this for another like seven years."

Tim huffs. "That doesn't sound right, but none of us know enough about this to refute it."

"How long till I meet you?" Dick asks, curious. The way Tim's acting around him is sending strange signals; he's simultaneously filling the role of the younger brother, but also someone of equal standing with Dick, much like Jason now, or Barbara perhaps.

Tim thinks about it for a moment. "Like another few months?" he says.

They're at the clock now. Walking through the entrance immediately makes Dick shiver, but he can't pinpoint whether it's because of memories or the actual temperature difference – because no amount of heating systems will truly work down here and it's a fact of life at this point.

Tim's telling him about how he became Robin, and despite it all, Dick finds himself laughing. "Wait wait wait," he says, the incredulity of all the coincidences hitting him. "You mean to tell me *baby* you figured it out?"

Tim scowls. "I wasn't a *baby*," he mutters.

"You've got some brain in there, kiddo," Dick says, despite the fact that Tim is around the same age as him right now. "And guts, to come to the *Manor* and tell me and Alfie—" He stops in his tracks.

"Dick?" Tim asks, turning around.

"I, uh," Dick wets his lips, "Damian's in school, and I get the feeling he doesn't really like me, so it's probably fine if I don't say goodbye to him…" His voice trails off, unable to verbalise his thoughts.

"Alfred and everyone else is down there," Tim reassures him, eyes seeing through the lack of words.

Dick lets out a breath and nods. Then he asks one final question.

"When does Jason come back?"

Tim doesn't look at him now. "In about three year's time, I'm pretty sure," he says.

Dick swallows, but it's alright. Most people don't get their loved ones back at *all.* Dick can wait three years.

Dick feels wrong in his skin. That's the first thing he notices when he becomes aware. He's been in the Cave medbay enough to recognise the feeling of the linen on the cots, but he doesn't understand…

The last thing he remembers is absolute exhaustion, letting Catalina lead him into the shower because he had blood in his hair, her sickly-sweet croon as she pushed him into the bed. He doesn't know if they had sex, or if he'd just passed out the moment his head had hit the pillow. He thinks that now knowing for sure should be more concerning than it currently feels, but his mind is a numb haze.

"Dick?" That's Tim's voice, but it's... deeper?

Dick pries his eyes open. Someone had the foresight to move the overhead light so it isn't glaring down into his eyes, but even so, it takes him a little while to fully blink away the blurriness.

"Tim?" he says, focusing on the figure standing by his bed that *looks* like Tim, but is surely, surely not, because the Tim he knows still has baby fat in his cheeks that makes them so fun to squeeze, and his hair is much shorter.

"Yeah, it's me, Dick." Tim squeezes his hand, but his eyes don't reflect his tenuous smile.

"Dick." Bruce's voice comes from the other side, and Dick turns his head around to face him. He almost reels back at the tired lines around Bruce's face, the grey in his temples. He hasn't shaved this morning, either. "How do you feel?"

"Fine?" Dick's voice is slightly more bewildered than it should've been.

"What year is it?" Bruce asks him.

Oh no. Dick can already see where this is going, and he curses absolutely everything in the universe that decided to pile *time travel* onto him atop all the other crap that has just happened.

"[Year]," he says, already knowing even before he sees their faces fall a little that he's in the wrong time. "Time travel? Alternate universe?" He's honestly too tired to even think about flipping off the universe.

“You’re about four years into the future,” Bruce clarifies. “But technically, this is more age regression than it is time travel.”

Chapter End Notes

i wanted to keep the chapter lengths for this somewhat consistent, but then bruce and jason happened and tim and dick happened and ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Thank you for reading!! Let me know what you think!

Chapter 4: IV

Chapter Notes

Warnings: No new warnings. Some references to non-con, discussions of sedatives in food.

By the way, if you notice that there's something I should put in the warning that I haven't/something you would like me to warn about, please let me know!

Massive thank you to everyone who's reading!!! I hope you all enjoy this chapter ^~^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim sits at the Batcomputer staring blankly at the screen. In front of him is everything they have on The Company, which isn't very much at all.

The main problem is, he isn't sure why he's got these files open; the case was closed after they got Dick back. There's no evidence tying The Company to this drug business and Dick's predicament. Tim can barely even convince *himself* that he's doing this for a reason rather than a way to avoid dealing with Bruce, let alone lay out his non-existent theories to another person.

It's about four in the morning when he glances at the clock. Tonight is Batman's night off – the night they've made him take off every fortnight – hence Tim being down in the chilly Cave.

He's pretty sure Dick would also be down here with him, had it not been for Alfred drugging his food so he'd finally fall asleep. Normally, Tim would protest – none of them like their food being drugged, and it's no way to convince Dick that they're friendies, but Dick's been here for about two days now and he hasn't slept a wink.

Tim wishes he could say that he anticipated Dick's behaviour being like this – whatever *this* is – but he can't, and he hates it. He *knew* Dick when he was this age. He was *sixteen* and he was Robin, not a little kid with the excuse of ignorance. He just… never noticed, apparently, that Dick was going through stuff beyond trying to take down Blockbuster.

Dick being in Bludhaven is no excuse, because Dick was there any time Tim needed him – and he still is – and Tim somehow manages to botch up his attempts to reciprocate it every time.

Tim lets out a low growl of frustration and scrubs a hand over his face, blinking bleary eyes at the screen and trying to take in the information all over again. It won't do to focus on what he could've done; he'll just have to try better and hope Dick forgives him for not being the brother Dick has been to him.

Tim stiffens when he senses someone watching him. Spinning around, he only relaxes when he sees Cass in a hoodie that's much too glittery to look like she bought it intentionally for herself, drinking a green coloured smoothie.

"Where's mine?" he asks, voice hoarse from disuse. Maybe he *should* go to bed. It's a bit childish for a twenty-year-old's *fuck you* to his parent be staying up late.

But he's not doing this to be rebellious, Tim reasons. He's doing it because he needs to fix Dick and get to the bottom of this situation. And after what Bruce did, Tim can't really say he deserves parental authority anymore.

"Get it yourself," Cass says, sitting on the armrest of the chair.

She wriggles her feet until Tim relents and lifts a leg, wrinkling his nose as the cold of her toes hits him through the trackpants he's got on.

"You ever thought about investing in socks," he mutters, doing his best to squash her feet with his weight.

"Socks are bad for blood circulation." Cass sucks the smoothie through the straw with an obnoxious sound, made worse by the echoing in the Cave.

"That's a *myth*," Tim tells her, "for menaces like you."

Cass simply tilts her feet a little, away from the warmer parts to the still-freezing skin, and Tim lets out an aggravated sigh. They sit in silence for a moment, until Cass' smoothie is finished.

"The Company?" she says, tilting her head a little.

It's not that Cass is going to be *sceptical*, because her skills are like hunches for everyone else. She knows that *Tim's* hunches are often just his subconscious putting together pieces before the rest of his brain. But there's something about telling someone else when his investigation – if it can even be called that – is still in such an early stage, that he squirms a little as he speaks.

"It feels like they're still out there, y'know?" he says. "Like it isn't really over." And then his eyes narrow as he brings up yet again the question that he knows he, Bruce, and Damian have all been asking since the rescue mission. "We all know there's something you guys are keeping from us, for instance."

Cass meets his gaze head on. "There's nothing that you need to know about," she says simply. "Nothing that'll help you with this, anyway."

"What could possibly be so bad that you two won't tell us?" Tim demands, turning in the chair a little. "You know we won't judge you for any decisions you had to make. We were all a little off our game."

None of them can really stay a hundred percent focused when a family member is the one in need of a rescue. Maybe it's because they so rarely had to be rescued. Tim can count on one

hand the number of times he's had to go in to extract Dick from a situation he wasn't already halfway through escaping from himself.

Cass is a husk when Tim continues to look at her. "We judge ourselves," she says. And then she silently slips off the chair and walks into the darkness of the Cave.

Tim exhales loudly, mentally punching himself for being so blunt. He'll have to be better the next time he gets Jason alone.

Another thirty minutes pass and Tim gives up getting any more information out of the reports. He stands with a stretch, spine cracking wildly as he bends backwards. It's about five in the morning now; no one should be up yet (or still).

After being up for almost a day and a half, Tim knows he'll likely crash for a solid ten hours the next time his head hits the pillow, and he has work for the company that needs to be done today, or there'll be a whole line of people out for his head.

Instead of heading to his bed, Tim makes a detour to his favourite sitting room. It's directly above the kitchen frequented by Alfred, and Tim had found out that the lower floor is accessible by an out of commission dumbwaiter a few years ago when he first moved into the Manor.

He thinks Alfred's caught on to the fact that he uses it, because it's been suspiciously free of the cobwebs and dust it'd been filled to the brim with since the first few times he used it.

Tim sets down his work laptop onto the coffee table and grabs a blanket from where it's draped over the back of one of the couches. It's warm from the sun, and the last traces of shivers from being in the Cave leave him as he settles on the carpeted floor, using the couch as a backrest.

It only takes Tim a few minutes to fill his flask up with coffee; when he returns, Dick's sitting on the couch and peering at the laptop screen with apathetic eyes.

Tim would've fallen back down the hole he'd just climbed up had his nights these last five or six years not been filled with unexpected appearances like this.

"Hey," he says, casually nudging the entrance shut.

Dick looks up at him and smiles a little. Tim still squirms at the way Dick looks at him ever since he turned this age. "Hey, Timbo," Dick says in that same easy way he doesn't say it anymore. "Have I thanked you yet for taking one for the team and working at WE?"

Tim snorts. "I don't think so, but you should," he tells Dick.

"I'll leave a note for future me," Dick says. He tucks his legs underneath him, settling against the arm of the couch.

Tim suddenly realises that for Dick, Tim's father isn't dead yet, and Tim has yet to be adopted. He wonders just how Dick's making sense of all this in his head – unless his

memories from his previous age regression are more prominent than any of them have assumed it is.

The fact that Dick hasn't exactly been forthcoming about details doesn't help.

"Aren't you meant to be asleep?" Tim asks, setting himself back into his cocoon.

Dick absentmindedly starts fiddling with Tim's hair, judt like Tim knew he would. "You're only confirming that Alfred put something in my food," he says. "So is your hair intentionally like a mop, or did you just forget to cut it?"

Tim bats at Dick's hand half-heartedly. "Shut up. It looks better when I've actually combed it."

"Ooh," Dick sings, "*combing*. Is this like that phase you had where you spiked it up and wore glasses?"

Tim spins around now. "How'd you know about that?" And then his eyebrows rise. "*Alfred?"*

Dick's smile is wide, but still so very brittle. Tim will take whatever he can get, even if his indignation is very, very real. "Yup," he says. "I think Bruce asked for updates every once in a while, so Alfie would include pictures. You looked really cute."

Tim braces himself for a cheek pinch that never comes, and now Dick looks the tiniest bit nostalgic. Tim doesn't know what his fifteen-year-old self would've said in this situation, and he wishes he did, just to make Dick feel a little more at home here.

It's strange, because this Dick is only a couple years older than him, about the same age as Jason is. Tim has always thought of Dick as… older? Wiser, maybe? He knows he's always seen Dick through hero goggles that only really went away after Bruce got lost in time, but he didn't realise until now that it never *really* went away. Maybe that's why this discovery about Bruce and Dick is hitting him so differently.

"What're you working on?" Dick prompts. He's absentmindedly braiding Tim's hair, but his hands are clumsy and shaking slightly, probably from lack of sleep.

Tim tries to see past the deep shadows under Dick's eyes, how much more visible his already rather prominent cheekbones are. "Uh," he says, rubbing at his eyes as he looks back at the screen. "Reports. I need to look over them before sending them in. They've gotta be in by noon today."

Dick glances at the clock. "And when was the last time you slept?" he asks.

"I napped yesterday," Tim starts to say, before his mind screeches to a halt. "Hey. I'm *twenty* now. You can't make me go to bed anymore."

Dick huffs a laugh. "Yeah," he says. "And yet, somehow, you're still the same height."

Tim spins around and lunges at Dick, and suddenly they're grappling on the carpet behind the couch.

Tim falls asleep almost immediately after their wrestling match, which is exactly what Dick has been counting on. This version of his tiny brother is strange and closed off and *different* in all the ways Dick supposes are inevitable, given the relentless passage of time, but he somehow still acts around Dick almost the same way.

The weirder part is that even *Tim* seems to be surprised by his own reactions, like he's unconsciously falling into an ingrained mould without even realising. Dick doesn't want to think about how their relationship will change in the future, doesn't want to think about the consequences of his actions and how they'll impact Tim eventually. Does Tim even know all the details? Has he ever read through the reports that probably exist?

Dick hopes not, and then feels ashamed at wanting to hide his transgressions from Tim. He needs to face up to them, to be held accountable.

He listens to Tim's even breathing as he burrows into the couch. He gently lays the blanket that had been on the floor over Tim's sleeping form.

And then he gets to work on the open laptop.

He would've gone to the Cave had it not been filled beyond what Dick had thought of as its maximum capacity, with people coming and going. Dick had wanted to sneak in after Tim had come up, but then *Bruce* had gone downstairs too, so now he had to resort to hoping that Tim's laptop had access to their network.

Dick's glad it hadn't gone into hibernation. He glances over the giant to-do list Tim's got on a sticky note on his desktop background, wincing slightly at the mess of work he's piling himself with. He doesn't want to mess with Tim's work at the company, but if he has time after he's found everything he's looking for, he'll help out a little.

Dick finds himself distantly thinking about whether Tim ever got around to university. He can't help wincing internally at the thought of *schoolwork* on top of working at the company and Tim's night gig. He wonders whether Bruce took it better this time than he did when Dick had dropped out.

Dick unscrews the flask of coffee Tim's brought up with him from the dumbwaiter shaft. He sniffs it first, to see if there's a noticeable scent of anything additional. Then he pours a little into his mouth and holds it there to test it with his taste buds. Lastly, he holds his nose closed and swallows the tiniest amount.

It passes the three tests, but he knows Alfred's always messing with what sedatives he's using. Not all of them are as easily detectable as others. He doesn't know how to verbalise it, even to himself, but the thought of being drugged to sleep makes him want to throw up.

Dick opens up the virtual environment their network operates in. When it asks for user identification, he purses his lips and shifts up onto his knees. Fishing Tim's hand out of the blankets without waking him is a feat unto itself, but Dick manages it, getting his pointer finger to the fingerprint scanner and swiping it a little.

Tim grumbles in his sleep, and Dick resists the instinct to soothe him with touch. If there's one thing he's learnt in the last few years since Tim became Robin, it's that he's *really* not used to things like fingers running through his hair, hands placing sheets over him. The only reason Tim hadn't woken when Dick had placed the blanket over him is because he's been up for so long.

Dick settles back against the footrest of the couch, tapping a few keys to access the reports from the year he's from. He has to know what he told Bruce. Because there's absolutely no way Bruce knows everything, no way he's allowing Dick to *stay*.

Maybe Dick did a few years. Maybe he actually went ahead with the plan to turn himself in...

Dick's eyebrows shoot upwards at the pages of documentation in Bruce's painfully detailed prose. Gang wars, the assumed death of what had apparently been a *fourth* Robin…

Wasn't Stephanie Tim's girlfriend?

He skims through the reports, looking for his own amongst all the rest. They're all written days after the actual events, but he apparently wrote up a couple while he was laid up with a few bullet wounds through a leg.

Two hours later, Dick exits out of the environment and reopens all the windows Tim had up. He doesn't know *what* to think.

Catalina dies in prison a few years after. He doesn't know why he went looking through prison records and find her, and he doesn't know how he feels now that he knows. Mostly, it's a whole lot of nothing.

Dick spends the next half hour or so finishing up that last document Tim had said was *really important* and *needs to be in by noon*, despite it being a Sunday. Fishing through his emails, Dick sends it to his secretary, because Tim now has a *secretary.*

The thought of being legally tied to Tim isn't nearly as weird as it probably should be, because he's considered the kid to be his brother ever since he became Robin, but he hates that Tim had to lose all his parental figures for it to happen.

Well. He doesn't particularly care what happens to Jack Drake, but he hates that Tim had to go through that. And Dana, too. From the stories Tim had told him, Dana had seemed nice.

Dick can barely comprehend the amount of loss that Tim had had to go through in that tiny period.

Dick leaves the sitting room as silently as he'd entered it, going back to wandering the halls. He knows that lunch on weekends are a family deal, when they're in the Manor. He assumes

that that's continued, what with the massive expansion of the family. The last thing he feels like doing now is spending hours before five or six others, trying to calm the waves swirling within him.

He's nauseas just thinking about it.

Dick heads into his room, the room he's barely been in since he woke up in the Cave, and fishes out the emergency protein bars from the hidden panel in his closet. There's a guarantee in these, at least, that they won't contain anything extra.

Part of Dick knows that Alfred will understand if he asks him to not drug his food, but he can't quite bring himself to make that request, either, because what if Alfred *doesn't?* And that lingering doubt in his mind is eating away at him; he *know* Alfred isn't like that, and he feels terrible at the thought of suspecting Alfred of all people doing something so underhanded, but he can't get rid of the niggling fear in the pit of his stomach.

Dick apparently falls asleep in the closet, because the next thing he knows when he opens his eyes is that there's a shadow in the doorway blocking his exit. Dick's shoulders hit the far wall when he slides backwards, before realising that it's *Bruce*.

He would've rather it be *anyone* but Bruce, but he supposes he can't avoid him in here.

Bruce had backed up when he'd seen that Dick had woken up. Now, he says, "Dick," in a soft voice, softer than it's been in *years*, and Dick's hit with the urge to burrow his face in Batman's cape and let him take care of this mess he's gotten himself into.

But there is no mess now, is there? He's in the *future*, where he's already taken care of the mess, for better or for worse, so why is he still lingering on that? He needs to move on, to focus on helping these guys find a way to fix this situation. They can't have him not at full capacity, and apparently Dick can't really deal with any sort of extra attention on him right now.

"Didn't mean to fall asleep in there," Dick says with forced levity.

He makes himself shuffle forward a little, so his legs stick out of the closet. The protein bar in his hand is half eaten; he folds the wrapper over the bar and tucks it into his pocket.

"I'm sorry I woke you," Bruce says, and his voice practically drips sincerity. It's a bit jarring, if Dick is being honest. "I came here to see if you wanted to have morning tea." Normally, Dick would assume it's a demand, an order, but the way Bruce says it makes that assumption fall away.

And now Dick's *confused*, on top of tired to the point of seeing black dots every time his head changes altitude even slightly. He wishes Bruce had chosen a different time to be weird.

"Uh," he says. "I'm not really that hungry."

Bruce's mouth turns down in the corners a little. "You've barely eaten since you've woken up," he says. "We have cereal now. Alfred's become a lot more lenient in the last few years."

Dick doesn't really feel like cereal, either, not when he's been having it for these last few months because it's an easy meal to prepare and stock. But he can never say no to Bruce, especially not when he's asking like *this*. "Okay," he says finally.

He waits a little until the world rights itself, and waves a hand dismissively at Bruce's halting gestures to assist his balance. They make their way down to the kitchen, Dick trailing a little bit behind Bruce.

It's surreal to be in the Manor again, after the events of the last… few days? It's been a week, at most, but the events have blurred in Dick's mind and now not even his innate sense of time can make sense of it.

Bruce settles in his usual seat at the breakfast bar. It's strange, the customs that last.

"No sedatives in anything," he promises. "But your body needs sleep."

Apparently he and Alfred have decided that Dick currently needs food more than he needs sleep, though. Dick's fine with that, because he can feel his stomach grumble quietly. When was the last time he had a proper meal? Catalina had ordered room service, had even tried feeding him morsels when he'd stared at the food blankly, but he'd soon thrown up everything into the toilet bowl.

"Never thought I'd see Alfred let something so sugary be in the Manor," Dick comments, looking at the box of Lucky Charms.

He settles down on the barstool closest to him, a few seats down from Bruce. His normal seat is the second one from the outside, but it feels wrong to sit there.

"I think he got more lenient when you hit your mid-twenties," Bruce tells him. "And no one else will go near that atrocity." He's got a muffin on a plate in front of him, and is working into it with a knife and fork. "Tea?"

Dick nods. He can already smell the peppermint coming from the teapot. While Bruce pours, he fixes himself a bowl of Lucky Charms. He'd never had this particular cereal growing up, or even as an adult – the first time he'd tried it was at Wally's house. Alfred probably wanted to get more sugar into his system, or at the very least, appeal to his sweet tooth.

Bruce set down the teapot beside Dick, so it wouldn't go cold while he was eating. He sipped from his own as he continued to eat his muffin.

"Can I come on patrol tonight?" Dick asks.

Bruce pauses for a moment, then turns to face him. "If you continue eating normally before then, and get more sleep," he says with some reluctance.

It's almost like magic how Dick's appetite partially reappears the moment Bruce says this. He nods and digs into the bowl with more gusto, even having it in himself to finish a second bowl.

Alfred had to take in Dick's costume for it to fit well enough. Part of Dick wishes he hadn't managed to finish it in time, so Dick would've had to don another outfit for tonight, at least.

Part of him is *angry*, because this is *his* costume, that *he* created and designed all for himself, and that he can't let Blockbuster (and Tarantula, his mind supplies in an unwanted whisper) take it from him. He gave them a lot, more than he ever wanted to, but he'll be damned if they take this, too.

But unfortunately, the anger dissolves within an instant because Dick's too *tired* to hold onto it and use it to fuel him; it's never been in him to sustain something like that. And in the absence of the anger, there's that same numb anxiety that's been haunting him.

Batman and Robin get into the Batmobile – and wasn't that a surprise, to find that there was *another* Robin now, and Bruce's biological child, no less. Dick had thought that the kid's scowl couldn't get any deeper, until he'd opted to patrol with Tim.

"Ready?" Tim says, bike helmet on.

Dick's current biggest regret about not taking any of these memories back to his present with him is that he'll never know to teach Tim better style. He winces every time he looks at Tim's cowl.

"I was—"

''—born ready, I know." Tim's voice isn't as exasperated as it is when Dick normally says that, and he can tell that Tim's smiling behind the helmet.

Dick swings his leg over his bike. He can instantly tell that he'd been the one to rebuild and modify it, and that partly helps with learning its features. Tim rushes out ahead of him as they're heading out of the Cave, and Dick instantly speeds up to match him.

"Hey, you're accompanying *me* on this patrol," Tim objects when Dick overtakes him.

"I'm still older than you, Timmy."

They're about partway to Gotham when Tim suddenly switches the comm channel to the main one, speaking to everyone who's out tonight. "Jason needs backup," he says, voice tense as he rattles off an address.

If Dick's memory of Gotham is correct – provided that there haven't been major changes in the last few years – then it's an abandoned warehouse. If he were honest, though, most of the time the addresses they have to go to end up being abandoned warehouses.

“Who’s Jason?” Dick asks as they change direction. Now he keeps pace with Tim, going neck and neck.

“Uh,” Tim’s bike doesn’t swerve in the slightest because he’s too much of a professional for that, but there’s a hint of panic in his tone, “maybe a moving vehicle isn’t the best place for this—”

“Jason as in *our* Jason?” Dick says, but this isn't new information. It just feels like he's rediscovering something he already knew, like the tracks in the mud have just been buried by water before they were able to be cracked and dry by sunlight. This is probably what they meant when they said he'd probably remember his past age regressed self - he just hasn't had a chance to think too much about anything beyond Blockbuster and Tarantula until now.

“I can't fucking believe this is the first time this is coming up,” Tim mutters, just loud enough to be heard over the comms. "Why me."

“How?” Dick asks.

“Lazarus Pit,” Tim responds. “But also a bunch of other stuff? Oh, and – promise you won’t freak out – he’s the Red Hood.”

“*Jason* is the *Red Hood?”* Dick practically yells. “But he’s—”

“He gets out of the seedy shit he’s involved in in a few years,” Tim offers mildly.

“But he’s killed people—”

“Look,” Tim interrupts, voice suddenly more steely than it’s been since Dick woke up, “all I know is that he and Bruce have come to some sort of understanding – I don’t know what it is; you’ll have to ask them if you really wanna know. But he doesn’t like talking about it, and we only just got to someplace normal with him.”

Tim’s asking him to not say anything, Dick realises. And he won’t, he knows that, because he… well, he *does* care about killing people, but he’d be a complete hypocrite to judge Jason based on that, after what had happened with Blockbuster, and hell, after how he’d killed the Joker with his bare hands. And their whole reason for crime fighting is to rehabilitate, isn't it?

The rest of the journey is silent. When they arrive at the building, Dick can see the Batmobile hidden in a shadow, and the bike that Cass had gone out on a few metres away from it. They drive to the other end of the building, leaving their bikes in a dark alleyway beside the dumpster.

Tim grapples to the roof, and the only hint to his movements is the slight shift in the air. Dick follows closely behind, landing quiet as a cat.

There’s a giant skylight right in the centre, and he and Tim peer into it. Down in the warehouse is a typical set-up. Boxes and crates pile against one wall.

“Shipment must’ve come through recently,” Tim says, voice barely audible. “Why’d he ask for backup? There’s no one here.”

The moment he finishes speaking, three people appear. Two are older, bulkier, and the third is a young boy, no older than eighteen. His mouth is gagged, and his hands are duct-taped behind him.

“Nice going, Ro—Red,” Dick says. “You jinxed it.”

Tim lets out a huffed breath.

There’s a crackle in Dick’s ear as a voice speaks. “Red, I need you and ‘Wing to take out the kidnappers and take care of the hostage.” The voice is deep, and there’s a slight rasp to it that Dick associates with smoking.

His mind instantly places it as *Jason*, and he wants to tell him to keep speaking, wants to say something himself, because there's something almost calming about its presence, but Tim’s already moving. Dick’s so off his game that he keeps getting distracted in the field, mind wandering from one thought to another. No wonder he's always been a few steps behind these last few days.

There’s an awkward pause as Tim looks at him, and Dick realises he’s waiting for Dick to take charge.

Dick’s about to open his mouth, when Tim says, “You take right,” and vanishes to the tiny opening in the skylight.

Dick follows, only a moment behind him.

Dick thanks the cover of night as they sail down into the room. There are three other men, heavily built and heavily armed, who come rushing in the moment they enter. Clearly, they were guarding this hostage. Dick wonders who the boy is, why he’s so valuable.

But then he doesn’t have time to think about that, because two goons are rushing at him and one of them has just begun shooting.

“Take care of the hostage!” Tim calls in his ear.

Dick wants to protest that there are *five* of them and there’s no way he’s leaving Robin with so many guns, but even when Tim had *been* Robin, he could’ve taken care of them alone.

Dick spins around and aims a kick at the midsection of the man behind him. The man doesn’t even let on that he’d been hit, and Dick sighs internally. They’re lucky this is in such close quarters, because that’s the only reason no one has started brushfiring.

Instead of taking the time to properly incapacitate the goon, Dick flips over him and darts to the far side of the room where there’s an entrance to what’s probably an office.

Dick kicks the door in, but there’s a shift in the air behind him and suddenly a body is grappling him from the side. The grip around his centre is ironclad, and no amount of bracing himself for the impact onto the hard floor would’ve prevented the air from rushing out of his lungs.

The thug who tackled him now has one hand on Dick's chest, effectively holding him down, and his body is pressing down so Dick can't move.

There's nothing holding down Dick's legs and he recovers from the wind being knocked out of him much quicker than the average person, so there's really no reason for why he completely freezes up for a moment as his opponent straddles him.

And then the man lifts an arm up and is about to bring down a fist when the situation finally clicks and Dick twists to the side, the blow landing on the concrete of the floor beside his head. In the moment that he's distracted, Dick snaps his hand to the arm holding him down, dislodging it just enough for momentum with his legs to do the rest of the job, freeing himself.

His breath is coming in short bursts, much too rapid for the energy he's exerted, but he can't think about that now because he has to take this guy down and then rescue the hostage.

The man goes to sweep Dick's legs out from under him, and Dick only notices at the last moment, jumping to avoid losing his balance. He's yanked to the ground, but he uses this to his advantage, neatly manoeuvring his legs around his opponent's torso and letting gravity pull both of them down.

Dick leaps away at the last moment, and lands on the man's chest. "Hey, do we have cuffs?"

"Catch!"

What looks like a giant batarang sails through the air. Dick's about to grab it when he's toppled, going rolling into the side of the table.

"This," the man hisses at him, speaking for the first time, "is going to be your last night. You've been nothing but a pain in my ass for—"

"For what," Dick pants, dragging himself to his feet. "For the last five minutes? You ever think that maybe you have anger issues?"

The door is right behind him, and he can see the boy still tied there looking at him with wide eyes. All he has to do is handcuff this pillar of brute strength.

Dick dodges out of the way when the thug lunges forward, neatly offering a kick to the backs of his knees. The man stumbles, but his fall is controlled as he grabs at something Dick can't quite make out in the darkness.

Fuck, Dick thinks, because the knife isn't aimed at him.

He's never caught a knife out of thin air before, not when it's going at this speed, but there's a first for everything, Dick supposes.

"Duck!" he yells even as he lunges forward to try and shield the hostage with his body.

An arm wraps around his opponent's neck and his eyes close as he slumps to his knees. Tim appears from behind him, looking at Dick with wide eyes, because the knife has sliced past

the side of Dick's head and hand he'd raised to try and grab it.

Dick spins around the moment he sees the man has been subdued, pleading with who knows what that the hostage will be alive.

The knife is in the boy's right shoulder. Dick breathes a sigh of relief that he isn't dead even as he dashes over to him.

"Hey," he says, reaching into his supplies for bandages. "You're going to be okay, alright? What's your name?" He takes off the cloth in the boy's mouth that had been serving as a gag.

The boy's breathing is still too harsh. Dick can hear Tim behind him talking over the comms and dragging the body of the sedated man away, and he tunes it out to focus on the hostage before him.

"I know it hurts, but you're going to be fine," he says, slipping perfectly into a soothing tone he'd perfected as Robin. "We just have to try and stem the bleeding as much as we can. And then I can untie you."

"Billy," he says, on the tail end of a gasp. "M' name's Billy."

"You're doing great, Billy," Dick soothes.

He holds down the wad of bandages around the blade, careful that it isn't jostled, and brings around one of his tiny medical scissors to cut through the duct tape holding Billy's wrists together.

Billy's movements are jerky as he tries not to move the entire right side of his body. His hands are flat on the floor on either side of him as he subconsciously tries to hold onto something.

"I have the hostage," Dick says into the comms. "He's got a knife wound, upper right shoulder. I've stemmed the bleeding and he should be fine."

"We're wrapping up here," Batman responds. "Bring him outside. The EMTs should be here soon along with the police."

"Copy that," Dick says. Then he turns and gives a sympathetic smile to Billy. "So we gotta head outside now, and this is gonna hurt a little bit more than it is right now, but there are paramedics right outside who can give you the good stuff." He can already hear sirens wailing.

"I's okay," Billy grunts. "But I might pass out on the way."

"I'll catch you if you do," Dick says. "Okay, let me do most of the work."

Securing the bandages in place with medical tape, Dick brings an arm around behind Billy's shoulders, and one arm grabs Billy by his upper arm. He advises the kid to take a breath and hold it, and then he *pulls*.

Billy lets out a ragged groan, but he's standing. Dick gives him a minute or so, and then he's practically supporting most of his weight as they make their way out of the warehouse.

The night air outside is lit up entirely by the lights from the police cruisers and two ambulances that have pulled up. Two EMTs rush forward when Dick and Billy emerge, taking over from him. Dick's glad to not have to step too far into the lights.

Instead, he slinks back by the side of the building and around to a little nook, where he can grapple up to the rooftop. From his vantage point, Dick watches as Batman and Robin finish talking with one of the officers.

"Finish patrol and regroup at the Cave for a debriefing," Bruce says over the comms. "We'll speak with the hostage."

But something about just leaving Billy there without saying goodbye or checking up on him at the very least doesn't sit right with Dick. Instead of going back to where he and Tim stashed their bikes, he slinks back down to the ground and makes his way to the ambulance he'd seen Billy get taken to.

The boy is lying inside the vehicle when Dick appears in front of it. Seeing him, one of the paramedics say, "Make sure he takes it easy, Nightwing," just before being called away.

Dick climbs inside. Billy's still awake, but only just hanging onto consciousness, by the look of it. "Hey, Billy," he says with a bright smile. "How're you doing?"

"You w're right," Billy says. "They *did* give me the good stuff."

Dick laughs. "I'm glad," he says. "You got family or friends out there who I could contact?"

Billy's smile fades. "No," he says. "Not right now, anyway."

Dick frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Nightwing," Batman's frosty voice calls from behind him, but Dick holds up a hand as Billy speaks again.

"One minute I'm walking to my next class, the next I'm in an apartment I've never seen before. Then some guy comes in and tells me to come with him, and I think they do the chlorine with a rag to the face thing – so cliché, amiright? – and I wake up in the warehouse." He makes a gesture that's probably meant to be a shrug.

Dick sits back on his haunches. "Huh," he says. "Uh, Batman? You might want to take over the questioning now." He has no idea what they're looking for specifically and the last thing he wants to do is jeopardise the case, even if he wants to go back to his own time even less - not that that anxiety makes a lick of sense, based off of the explanation he was given about his situation.

Batman has to wait until Dick's left the vehicle to climb in. "Hello, Billy," he says, in a gentle rumble that many who face Batman never hear. "I have a few questions I'd like to ask, if you don't mind. We've had a few cases like yours recently, if that makes you feel better."

“Go ahead,” Billy says. “Can only go uphill from here, right." Even as he says it, it doesn’t look like he entirely believes his own words.

“What year is it?” Bruce says.

“[Year],” Billy answers instantly. “Why, was that the wrong answer? What year do *you* think it is?”

“You’re currently twelve years in the future, from your perspective,” Bruce tells him. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen.” Billy’s words are starting to slur now, and Dick hopes Bruce is going to wrap things up soon. He’d like to not break yet another promise.

“One of us will come and visit you in the hospital,” he says. “Don’t worry about being kidnapped again, or where you’re going to go after you're released. My team’s will take care of everything.”

With that, he exits the ambulance. An EMT had been standing beside Dick during the questioning, and she now says, “Anything we need to know about?”

Bruce looks at her for a moment. “He won’t have any records,” he tells her. “I doubt he has any family you’ll be able to find. If it’s possible, keep him in the hospital until police find somewhere secure to hold him.”

The paramedic sighs. “I’ll do my best,” she says. “But it’s harder when it comes to minors.”

Batman nods, and with a sweep of his cape, he steps into the shadows. Dick follows him to the top of the building, turning his comms unit on. If Tim’s already left to finish his patrol, maybe Dick can go along his usual route.

It feels like it’s been forever since he last patrolled around *any* city, even though it really hasn't.

“Nightwing,” Bruce calls as he’s heading to the Batmobile. “Head back to the Cave.”

“Wh—but patrol’s not over,” Dick says with a frown. The last time he’d been home this early, he was probably still a pre-teen.

“It is for you,” Bruce says. When Dick opens his mouth to argue again, he adds, “Your body’s probably still recovering from the serum. You’ve had one decent meal and solid stretch of sleep for the first time in two, three days. At this rate, you’re going to hurt yourself, and probably others.”

Dick can’t argue when Bruce tells him he’s not well enough to prevent others from being hurt. That, and the fact that he could tell while he was fighting that he wasn’t at full capacity, that he wasn’t reacting right.

But he doesn’t want to go slinking back to the Manor for another sleepless dawn.

And then the strangest thing happens. Bruce caves.

“You can ride along in the Batmobile with me and Robin,” he says. “If you want to stay out for the rest of patrol. You can sit in on stakeouts, but no fighting. That’s the compromise.”

Dick blinks. In all the years that he’s been by Batman’s side, he’s never seen him relent like this. Bruce has done so, on many occasions for many things, but never Batman. Once, he may have seen this as the compromise Bruce says it is, but right now he can’t think of anything worse than to be in a car with Bruce for the next couple hours.

“No, you’re right,” he says. “I’m off my game tonight. I think I’ll just head back. Besides, Robin doesn’t exactly seem to like me very much. He’ll probably do better with some alone time with you.”

Bruce grimaces. “Robin’s behaviour is… it’s not out of dislike.”

Dick doesn't know what to say to that. Of all his current siblings, he knows Damian the least. “I’ll see you when you guys get back,” he says as he backs towards where his bike is.

Batman doesn’t say anything until Dick’s just out of earshot to only register his words as a vague sound.

Tim stares down at the stacks of paper he, Jason, and Cass had managed to move from the warehouse and into the Cave. They would’ve scanned them directly into the network, but Tim’s hunch had been right.

They hadn’t taken down The Company at all. They’d only managed to get rid of one of its outer branches, and not even a major one at that. Tim isn’t even entirely sure they’d done even *that*, based on how incredibly wide this operation seems to be.

Jason had left after delivering the last box to conduct his usual rounds to all the houses of the kids that had been de-aged, and Cass had taken one look at the amount of paperwork they need to sort out and announced that she had to go shower. It’s been about an hour and she has yet to emerge, and at this point Tim’s ready to shut off the hot water line to the Cave.

But what he’s really waiting for is Bruce to get back, because he needs to tell Bruce about this and about his theory.

The Batmobile roars into the Cave, screeching into its signature parking with perfect accuracy. Tim’s tried so many times – when Bruce has been out of town for whatever reason – to recreate the ninety-degree spin at full speed into the jerking stop, but he’s never quite managed it.

The only thing that makes him feel better about it is no one else is able to do it quite like that, either.

Batman and Robin exit the car, Robin going straight to his station to type out his report. Damian is good with a schedule like that, always perfectly on time with anything related to their night duties.

Tim fixes up the piles of paper strewn messily around him – and why Tim seems to have that effect on paperwork is another question – as he watches Bruce take off the cowl and run his hands through his flattened hair in a failed attempt to fix it.

“Have you seen Dick?” is the first thing Bruce asks as he walks up to Tim.

Tim opens his mouth before he even has an answer. He closes it again with a frown. “I haven’t seen him since he went to speak with the hostage,” he says.

“He isn’t back here yet?” Bruce asks. He eyes the parked vehicles again, as though more may appear if he looks hard enough.

Tim shakes his head. “I’ll try reaching him over comms,” he says. “But that can wait. You gotta look at these first.”

Only now does Bruce seem to notice the documents. “These are from the warehouse?” He goes to crouch beside Tim, to get a better perspective of where to begin.

They’re the same in a lot of ways, him and Bruce, but this is probably the thing they’re most similar in. Maybe it’s because Tim had picked up so much of his documenting and filing from Bruce, but he finds it easy to see Bruce’s thought process from a random selection of documents like the ones he currently has surrounding him, and he knows that Bruce is the same with Tim's methods, while Tim’s siblings ask for a summary first before they dive in.

Tim knows Bruce sees it when there’s a sharp intake of breath. Bruce leans in closer, plucking the document up from the array.

“I’m not seeing things, am I,” Tim says. “It’s all connected.”

Bruce nods grimly, fingers pressing the bridge of his nose. “No,” he says, in that tone of his that means that once he processes all this, there’ll be absolute *fury.* “You’re not imagining things.”

Tim continues: “But what I don’t get is why Dick got turned to nineteen. The rest of them are younger. The clientele *wants* them younger.” The words leave a bitter taste in his mouth.

The twist in Bruce’s lips reflect Tim’s feelings. “Cass and Jay haven’t told us the full story of how they found Dick,” he reminds Tim. He places the paper back down where it’d been before. “I’ll call in the others. We need all hands on deck for this one again, considering we never took down the human trafficking scheme in the first place.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading ^~^

It's been a weirdly hectic couple weeks and I'm honestly surprised this is almost exactly a week after the last chapter was posted? Maybe I'll actually be able to stick to my vague posting schedule lol. I'd love to hear any of your theories if you have any about the Nefarious Plot of the fic 👀

Chapter 5: V

Chapter Notes

> hi everyone! sorry for the wait - this chapter Refused to be written, and this past week has been a combination of schoolwork and squeezing tumblr like a stress ball ^~^
>
> Warnings: issues with eating (let me know if you need me to elaborate or mark the section it's in), some very vague references to non-con, discussions of child abuse, discussions of killing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dick stares up at the window from where he's half hidden by the shadows. The Clock Tower still stands tall and proud, one of the few survivors of the earthquake that had nearly destroyed Gotham a few years ago.

It'd been almost muscle memory to come here instead of heading back to the Manor early. Even before their friendship had turned romantic, Barbara had been one of Dick's closest friends, someone who *truly* knew what it was like to work with Bruce, someone he could lean against and offer support to in return.

This mess with Catalina and Blockbuster has taken even that, but the only thing that Dick feels now, as he gazes at the structure before him, is cold and empty from the inside out. His eyes trace the vines of ivy as they lace up the ageing stonework, climbing to the very top like he longs to do.

Dick doesn't know why he's still here. Facing Barbara is… not something he wants to do right now, not when he's reeling left and right as he tries to move with the flow of everything around him. Besides, does he truly want to find out what their future holds?

There's a tiny *ping* in his ear, an indication that there's someone on the other end requesting an open line. It's likely Barbara, having spotted him with one of the cameras spread out around the building.

Dick doesn't really want to talk right now, even though that's all he wants to do. Instead of answering, he gets back on his bike and starts driving.

He isn't focusing on where he's going, too busy trying to go back to the numbness rather than this anchorless feeling he's carting around. Cityscapes flit by as he speeds a little beyond even what's normal for a vigilante, surroundings a passing blur of lights. Gotham may be unsafe at this hour, but that doesn't mean it has a non-existent nightlife.

Dick almost doesn't realise he's out of Gotham and on the highway to Bludhaven until he's about halfway there. But something settles in him at the thought of seeing the city, despite

everything that happened.

Besides, after all the hell Gotham has given Bruce, it's not like he feels any differently towards her. It just leads to more determination to do better, to work harder. Dick vows the same for his city.

The warning sign on the side of the road doesn't register to him until later, when he reaches a giant wall.

Frowning, Dick dismounts and turns off the ignition. He probably passed some sign explaining why the city's walled off like this a mile back and didn't notice. So now he can either keep going to check up on the city – he's watched snippets of the news; it would've mentioned anything *too* bad – or he can turn back.

Maybe it's a new security measure.

The second option only registers to him after he's already slipped past the barricade, and even then just as a passing thought. There's no way Dick can turn around and head back to the Cave without seeing what's going on in Bludhaven.

Besides, there's a huge chance that whatever it is, it's because of Nightwing's absence. He doesn't know how long he's been gone for, or if anyone would've taken over for him, but that doesn't matter. He's here now; he can take over for his older self until this situation gets fixed.

Although, he kind of wishes he'd looked at the reports for more recent events. He wants to know what he's driving into.

Dick can barely see in the darkness, which is another oddity, because this close to Bludhaven, there should be visible lights from the skyscrapers and buildings. Did something happen with the electricity?

Dick's fiddling with his phone, getting up the torch. He's just turned it when he takes a step and the ground beneath his feet is just… not there.

The light comes on just in time for Dick to see the *massive* hole, as though he's at the edge of a cliff. It's only a lifetime of training and preparing for surprises – not to mention running along rooftops – that keeps the rest of him from following.

Dick stands at the edge of the crater, the only source of light the torch on his phone, and he *stares*.

What had once been Bludhaven is now absolutely nothing. He can only see as far as the torch goes, which, in this never-ending blackness, doesn't seem very far, but all around is the crater. Dick aims the torch downwards, to see perhaps whether there's a way to walk forward, but it's seems to go down forever.

How did this happen? How had he *let* this happen?

Dick's legs give out and he finds himself sitting, legs folded beneath him in a way that's terrible for blood circulation, but he can't bring himself to care because his city is *gone*.

Dick remembers the power of the Internet, and unlocks his phone as fast as his shaky fingers can work, looking up news on Bludhaven from the last few years.

Chemo. Then a nuclear explosion.

Dick runs a hand through his hair as he skims through various news articles. After a moment, he places the phone down beside him and grips his hair tight in both fists, rocking back and forth as he tries desperately to breathe.

He'd thought that he'd *fixed* things. He can't pinpoint a specific reason for that deduction beyond the fact that he'd seen countless reports written by himself on the Batcomputer servers, up to the present day. Dick had just assumed that that meant everything was *better* now, that he'd done something that meant he could…

Well, honestly, something that meant he could live with himself.

There's another *ping* in his ear. Bruce has no doubt noticed by now that he didn't go back to the Cave.

Dick doesn't answer it. Instead, he roots around for his phone again and shoots off a semi-incoherent text, saying only, *be back soon*.

The second it goes through, there's a phone call to him from Bruce, and Dick sighs as he declines it. The screen goes from the call to his contacts, and he blinks at it, because there's a group inhere that hasn't been there in *years*. Not since… well, not since they disbanded the Titans again, ages ago.

He clicks on it hesitantly, but sure enough, there's a list of names there as familiar to him as his own. Roy, Wally, Garfield, Kory, Vic, Raven.

Donna.

Donna.

Dick has no idea what this means. It's not unheard of, in the superhero community, to die and come back to life. Apparently even his own adoptive brother did it. But Dick *remembers* how it'd felt to watch Donna die, how he'd been the first one there because it was *his* fault that she'd died, protecting him.

It's one thing to see Jason as he is now, after only really experiencing his death through mission reports and a gravestone. A grotesque display in the Cave. It's another altogether for… this.

Dick's dialling the number before he can even consider other possibilities. That perhaps it's a different Donna, or maybe that his future self is a nostalgic piece of shit for *baiting* him like this—

“Dick?” His name is spoken on the tail end of a yawn, and normally Dick would apologise, but tonight he’s struck speechless at hearing Donna’s voice on the other end, voice choking up even as he tries to force out a sound.

When he doesn’t answer, Donna speaks again, this time sounding much more awake. “Dick, is that you?” she says. “Is everything alright?”

Dick doesn’t know the answer to that, because it’s simultaneously *yes* and *no*. “Donna,” he says, and his voice probably sounds like someone took it through a cheese grater.

“Are you okay?” comes a demand from the other end. “You don’t sound okay—"

“Yes, I—everything’s fine,” he says, trying to sound normal. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I was going to get up soon anyway,” Donna responds easily. She leaves a comfortable little gap in conversation that he can easily fill. “It’s been a while,” she offers when he doesn’t take it. “Haven’t heard from you since you took a few months off.”

“Yeah, uh,” he covers the microphone as he sniffs loudly, “long story. A weird one, too.”

“I have time. I got up early today.”

Dick can practically *hear* her smile. It makes his chest clench tightly at the thought of Donna being alive to do so.

“So, um, I’m guessing the mission I took time off for kinda… went a bit sideways,” Dick begins, catching her up on the main details. “So when I’m from, you’re…” he finishes, trailing off.

“Dead,” Donna says, and Dick closes his eyes against the darkness of the crater his legs were now dangling from.

“Yeah,” Dick says. “And now I find out that Bludhaven’s been destroyed, too.” He lets out a laugh that's a bit too on the side of manic for him to be considered sane.

Donna lets out a breath. “Dick, I’m sorry,” she says, because what more is there to say? She knows what this city meant to him, that it’d been *his* responsibility. “Dick, where are you?”

“The bigger question is, where’re *you*?” Dick tries for a lighter tone. “Your status says you’re visiting aliens.”

“I just got back from a trip. I’m in New York now. Are you where I think you are?”

Dick huffs a humourless laugh. “If you mean Bludhaven, then yes. How do you think I found out?”

“So you don’t mind if I pop in for a visit,” Donna says. “Stay where you are, okay?”

Dick doesn’t have time to answer before Donna hangs up. He has a *smile* on his face, he realises, feeling the muscles move as they go back to their neutral position.

Dick clutches his phone in his hand now as he waits, sitting there, because Donna said to not move. He doesn't know how much time has passed before the first little piece of doubt pops up in his head. *Maybe it was a hallucination.*

He stifles it a little desperately, but it's followed by a barrage of others, and he has to turn his phone on again to look at the call history.

It's still there, as blatant as ever. Dick doesn't let the screen go dark, eyes trained on it. He doesn't know how long it's going to take Donna to get here, but sitting in the wreckage of everything he tried to build, his *life*, she's an anchor he desperately needs.

He's bowed forward, eyes slipping shut from a bone-deep tiredness, when there's a whipping noise from above him. In the haste to get up, because that's *Donna* right there, landing as gracefully as ever, his phone drops into the crater.

Dick barely notices, partly because it doesn't make a sound, but mostly because he's stumbling forward to wrap his arms around his friend.

She's in costume, to match his, the same version that she died in. Dick doesn't think about that as he feels her familiar arms around him, burying his face in Donna's shoulder and clutching as tight as he wants, because he'll never be strong enough to squeeze her to death.

Dick only registers that Donna's been speaking this whole time a few moments later. He draws back a little, one gloved arm going to rub at his face and nose.

"Sorry for blubbering all over you," he says with a wet chuckle. "But… I mean, Jason was one thing, but now I find out *you're* here too, and…"

"Come on, let's go sit somewhere with a view," Donna says.

But she slips her hand into his as they walk to the other side of the giant wall, and Dick's relieved beyond words.

"The Titans got back together?" he says, trying for a lighter conversation than *how'd you come back* would bring.

Donna nods. "Raven's father again," she says ruefully. "She has a bunch of brothers, it turns out. They targeted all of us, we teamed up to fight back…"

"And realised we're a great team and fighting together felt great and we should get the team back together," Dick finishes.

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It's not. I just… I can't imagine being on another team like that." Dick tries to explain, but it's hard when he can't even put it into words he himself understands. "Not when the last time we got together, you *died*."

"Dick," Donna says, stepping in front of him so she can meet his gaze straight on. She places her hands on his shoulders. Donna's just a bit taller than him, but Dick has never truly felt

that height difference, and he doesn't now. "It wasn't your fault. And I don't regret it. I'd never regret saving you. You'd do the same for me."

You shouldn't've had to, Dick wants to say. He's supposed to be *better* than that. And the one time he can't handle it, Donna had been the one to pay the price.

They've always been able to read each other better than anyone; Donna sighs when Dick doesn't respond. "What've you been doing all this time?" she says.

Dick shrugs a little. "I woke up like this a couple days ago. The first day was mainly the others convincing me they weren't evil, yada yada – future past me even left a helpful video. Tonight's the first time B let me out on patrol." Although that would probably be disappearing after he got back, what with driving all the way to the barren wasteland that is Bludhaven.

They see his parked bike on the road, and head to the side, towards a little copse of trees and a fallen log.

"They know anything about how long you're going to be like this?"

Dick blinks awake a little more. "Argh, God, I'm sorry. I completely didn't think of the team right now – if you guys need backup or anything, I'm still available, and obviously better aged than I was three days ago—"

"Dick, shut up," Donna tells him, nudging his shoulder with hers. "I was asking to see how *bored* you were going to get. The team meet up from time to time; if you aren't allowed out of the Cave or the city, we can meet you there."

Dick finds a smile growing picturing the look on Bruce's face if the Titans showed up on their front doorstep. "Oh, yeah, he'd love that."

"We can still call it a play date, if that smooths things over," Donna adds, and not for the first time, Dick wonders how he ever survived without her.

"So let me get this straight," Jason says, stepping a little away from where they're standing around the table in the centre. "They're fucking…*regressing peoples' age?* For human trafficking? That's… that's sick."

His words echo exactly what's been going through Bruce's mind since they put the pieces together. Bruce nods, mouth a thin line. "One of the files we retrieved showed an order for a hundred aged seventeen. I'm sure we'll find more of the same if we keep digging."

“But Dick was like, nineteen,” Tim says as he spins on his chair at a dizzying speed. “Was he part of a different batch, then?”

Bruce aims a pointed look to Jason and Cass, who meet it head on.

“Probably,” Cass responds to Tim. “Not everyone turned the same age, right?”

Jason shakes his head in agreement, smoothly continuing from Cass’ nonchalant response. “A whole bunch of them in my area were sixteen,” he says. “But this is a big lead. We just gotta keep watching their houses till someone comes to collect.”

“Maybe,” Bruce says, staring down at the papers spread out before them.

How had they missed something so big? His mind is running as fast as it can, trying to collate all the information spread out before him, but no matter how quick he is, it already feels like they’re all fifty steps behind. They may have completely ruined their chances of taking them down with their actions so far—

“Wanna share with the class? Not all of us can read your thoughts,” Jason says irritably.

“We may not have taken down the entire operation, but we took down *something*,” he starts by saying. “See here.” He plucks a few pages paper-clipped together and places it in front of Jason.

Jason squints at the first page, and Bruce wonders, not for the first time, whether he should recommend a good optometrist. The rest of the kids mill around to peer down at it as well.

It’s a list of business transactions made over the span of a year, showing shipments of large containers throughout the country and also internationally. As Jason looks at it, his eyes flash green for a second before he squeezes them shut and takes in a breath visibly. The whole incident is over in less than a second; the only reason Bruce notices it all is because he’d been watching at the right time.

Distant pride fills him at how far Jason’s come. He needs to find some way to let him know that, because the time for keeping *good* emotions, good feelings, hidden is past. But after everything that happened with Dick, and the last time he talked to Jason alone, he has no idea how to even begin to go about that.

“So far no pick-up,” Tim murmurs. “But they have to know they’re here. There’s been at least two mentions of it on the news so far.”

“It’s only been one missed month,” Cass says. “They could be regrouping. Pooling resources to gather up the remaining people.”

Bruce grunts in acknowledgement, and then falls silent once more. There’s a plethora of information to be squeezed out of the pages before them, and he won’t be satisfied until all of it is on their servers. The Cave falls quiet again.

The environment is different now. Tim and Dick usually made up the majority of the noise, tossing theories and information back and forth. None of them are very loud on their own, but

Bruce has seen how Tim and Dick's combined efforts have solved cases faster than silence in the Cave did. He had never minded, putting in earplugs if it ever got too bad.

Today there's no Dick here, something that's still worrying at him. Tim's apparently only going to speak when necessary, and he doesn't look at Bruce when he does so – not that Bruce blames him. Damian isn't even here; it's his night off and he'd fallen asleep before Jason had called Tim for backup.

"Why'd you call us here?" Jason asks, crossing his arms.

"Delegation," Bruce says. "There's too much here for me to go through alone, and I want Damian to be… less involved. I've got Oracle looking for patterns internationally, but I need all of you as well. Please." He adds that last part after a moment, looking at Tim, Jason, and Cass each in the eyes.

Don't demand, just ask. You aren't their superior officer; you're their father. And you'll be surprised at how receptive they might be to a simple question.

Jason blinks in surprise, before staring at him incredulously. Maybe this wasn't the right time to assume they might want a choice in the matter.

Bruce's mouth twitches in irritation at himself, for constantly getting this *wrong*, but he does his best not to let it leak into his tone. "I'll send you all the files when they're ready," he says.

"Who's going to tell Damian?" Cass asks.

A lot of the time, if Dick's on the case with them, he'll fill in anyone who wasn't there. The rest of the time… well, Bruce assumes they go through reports or something. It's yet another thing he somehow put on his eldest without realising, something that's neither efficient, when looking at it from a leadership perspective, or fair in any way to Dick.

Bruce adds it to his ever-increasing list of mistakes, the things he needs to rectify.

"I will," he says. "When he wakes."

Damian won't take well to being sidelined from this case, especially considering that the group they're after kidnapped Dick, but Bruce has apparently gotten increasingly more protective the older he gets. He knows that Dick, when he was Damian's age, had been involved in pretty much everything Batman did. He also knows that using Dick's upbringing as a reference point isn't the best idea, particularly considering recent revelations.

He'll just have to keep Damian as busy as he can to make sure he doesn't feel excluded, or try to go off on his own.

"Dick?" Jason asks, breaking Bruce out of his thoughts on Damian and to the other pressing issue: Dick's disappearance.

Tim blinks, as though suddenly remembering something. "He never got back from patrol," he says distractedly, fiddling with his comms unit.

“What do you mean, he never got back from patrol?” Jason turns to Bruce. “It’s his first night and you let him off alone?”

Bruce is no longer surprised by how vehement Jason can be when it comes to Dick. But that first conversation they had, maybe a year ago, after Dick had been slipped a hallucinogen and vanished for months because of something he’d thought *Bruce* had said, he’d been absolutely *floored* at the protective anger in his second eldest.

“I told him to head in early. He said he would. When I got back, he wasn’t here,” he says, eyes on Tim as he waits to see whether Dick will answer.

“No response,” Tim says, already stepping towards the Computer. “But I can track the bike and the comms… oh, shit.”

“What?” Cass steps forward, and then makes an unhappy noise.

“He’s gone to Bludhaven.”

Oh no. Bruce wishes he’d had more *time*, more *insight* so that they could’ve been the ones to break it to Dick. Because based off what he remembers, Dick at this point in time would be *reeling* from finding out about the destruction of the city he considered his own to protect.

“Did no one tell him what happened?” Jason says, frowning at the screen.

Tim chews on a strand of his hair before Jason whacks at his hand to make him stop. Bruce is glad; it’s a gross habit and he really needs to hit up Google to see how he can get Tim to stop it.

“He went through a bunch of older reports from my laptop the other day,” Tim says. “So either he knows and went to check himself, or…”

“Or he just found out,” Jason finishes.

Bruce’s phone buzzes, and he glances at the screen, relief flooding him at the words on the screen *Be back soon*.

“Dick,” he says to the rest of them as an explanation. “He says he’ll be back soon.”

Jason shrugs. “Well, he’s a big boy again. You can’t exactly not let him go out.”

Bruce doesn’t say anything in response, because Jason doesn’t *know*. To be fair, Bruce himself barely knows what happened in Bludhaven beyond the major details – or anything that was explicitly written in reports. He never tends to go over Dick’s reports with too fine a comb, usually just skimming them to have a general idea about what he'ss doing. And with the mess in Gotham at that time, he’d probably overlooked a *lot*.

So that settles his night reading, then. But after they’ve gone through all of this. It needs to be dealt with, and fast. They can’t allow The Company to get another shipment of kids (adults?) out to their buyers.

“I’ve already gotten about half of this on the BatCloud,” Bruce starts to say, before he’s interrupted.

“The *BatCloud?”*

Bruce doesn’t know *how* Jason has managed to go this far without being aware of its official name. He purses his lips as Tim and Cass snigger.

“They had a vote after we updated the system,” he says tiredly. “Apparently we have to keep in theme.”

Jason stares at him for a moment longer. “At this point, why the fuck did I expect anything else,” he says, throwing up his arms. “But does Superman call *his* cloud storage *SuperCloud? No*, because it sounds *dumb*.*”*

“That’s because they don’t *have* a cloud storage,” Tim retorts, sounding like his old self for the first time in days. “They have the Fortress of Solitude.”

“Which is exactly my point. Theirs is called the *Fortress of Solitude*, and we call this the *BatCave* and have the *BatCloud*. Why do we let you name shit down here.”

Tim glares at him. “It was already like that when I came in,” he protests.

Cass shrugs a little. “I like how SuperCloud sounds. Like a really intense smoothie.” She glances at Jason, “Steph blames you for the names, by the way.”

Jason – there’s no other way of putting it – squawks. “It was like that when *I* got here *too*, douchenoggin.”

“Yes,” Bruce says, gazing up at the ceiling in hopes of being awarded with more patience than he has. “*Dick* named them.”

There’s complete silence in the Cave, before Cass says, “I thought it was *you*.”

Bruce has, in all honesty, never felt more insulted in his life.

Tim’s looking at him in disbelief. “How could you let him *do* that to us?” It’s probably the first time since showing Bruce the video that Tim’s said something to him that wasn’t case related. “Do you know how it feels to have to say ‘I need to go; the Batmobile’s waiting for me’ or ‘I’m doing research on the Batcomputer’.”

Bruce runs a hand down his face, wondering how they got so far off track here. “He was eight,” he tries to explain. “I didn’t think it’d *stick*.” When no one says anything, he finally says, “As I was saying—”

“You’ll send up whatever stuff you want us to look over, we got it,” Jason says, waving a hand.

It’s like with Bruce’s words, and the reminder of their reality, all the humour has drained out of the room. Despite the necessity, Bruce wishes it could stay.

But after everything, he doesn't deserve that comfort. Not when it's his fault it's ruined.

Bruce sighs. "Yes," he says. "Meeting adjourned, in that case." The words feel strange in his mouth; he can't quite remember how he ended meetings before, but he knows it wasn't like this.

They slowly disperse, but not before Cass drags him in for a sparring match. Matches with Cass are probably Bruce's favourite form of de-stressing, purely because of the amount of *concentration* he has to put in to last as long as he does.

Tonight is no different. This is usually a time for them to talk, to catch up – it's a sort of competition, too, to see who can provide a piece of information shocking enough to throw the other off balance.

Bruce doesn't know whether reaching out will be reciprocated, but he tries anyway.

"We haven't had you over in a while," he says, meaning as a civilian.

"Been busy," Cass responds, with an uppercut blow that momentarily makes Bruce too busy to respond.

"How's Steph?" He hasn't seen her in the Manor (or the Cave) in ages, either. The last he heard, she and Cass were thinking about taking their relationship one step further and moving in together.

There's a flurry of parried blows before Cass responds. "She's okay. Busy too. Med school."

Try as he might to get rid of the urge to nod to Cass in the middle of a sparring match, it's just something so ingrained in Bruce that he can't help it sometimes, especially when the lines between Batman and Bruce Wayne are so blurred. He sees Cass smile as he almost loses a match when he does so this time.

"Of course," he says. "Are you two still coming to dinner tomorrow night?" They've been unable to stick to a specific night for family dinners, and now Alfred will email them all with whatever date he chooses.

There's currently only been two occasions when someone couldn't make it because of prior engagements; Bruce doesn't know how Alfred got access to everyone's calendars, and he doesn't really want to question the man's magic.

Cass hesitates before she answers. "I think so," she says.

And that's how Bruce knows that *she* knows. Cass looks away the moment his attack falters, when she reads on his body what Bruce has just found out.

The remainder of their match is all formalities, as Bruce tries desperately to figure out what to say. There's nothing he *can* say that'll make this better, especially to *Cass* of all people.

Cass must get frustrated at how distracted Bruce is, because she quickly and efficiently finishes the fight with a sword to Bruce's gut. Cass taps twice and counts to five; Bruce could

break out of the hold with relative ease, but he doesn't.

"Cassie," he says softly, backing away. "I…"

You were supposed to be different*,* Cass signs furiously. *You said he was wrong to be violent towards a child, but you did the same.*

Bruce feels each word like a punch to the gut. He feels everything Cass isn't saying, things like broken trust and hypocrisy.

I know, he says, hoping she gets what he's trying to sign because his fingers are shaking from a combination of adrenaline and her words. *And I'm* sorry. *I'm trying to be better. To Dick. And all of you.*

And that's all he *can* say.

Cass doesn't respond, or look like she really believes him. Bruce doesn't blame her, and when she silently disappears to put away the sword and go change, he doesn't call her back. He does the same with his, but they might as well be on different planets.

But then, just as she reaches the foot of the staircase, Cass turns around and says, "We'll be at dinner," and slips away before Bruce can respond.

It's about three hours later that Dick slips into the Manor from the Cave. He hadn't meant to be out so long, but once he and Donna had begun talking, it had taken the sun rising to stop them.

It's been a long time since he's actually been some semblance of *okay*.

His stomach is growling, and as much as he doesn't feel like eating right now – does he ever, anymore? – he heads to the kitchen anyway to put together something quick and easy. Alfred always has stuff like that ready to go, for when he's asleep.

Dick has often found that stolen food tastes better than his own. Maybe it's a result of how he grew up, first in the circus where everyone shared everything, and then with a team made up mostly of teenagers with a *very* high metabolism who tended to eat everything in sight, regardless of labels.

He knows that Tim, for instance, *hates* sharing cutlery with a vengeance, but is generally alright with sharing food. Jason - when Dick had known him, that is - had been insanely protective over his food, to the point of stabbing Dick with a fork one time when he went to

grab a stray piece of lettuce. If Dick really tries, he can probably still find the scar on the back of his hand.

The fridge has a box with leftovers from what appears to be a casserole. As Dick looks at it, however, it's like his stomach shrinks into himself. He can tell he's hungry, knows he should probably eat, but he still stands there with the fridge door open, staring at its contents.

The thought of eating makes something unpleasant stir beneath his skin, makes his mouth twist a little. It brings forward an onslaught of unwanted thoughts, things buried deep within him and saved only for the darkest moments in the middle of the night, things with words like *deserve* and *worth*.

Dick no longer wants to eat.

He goes to close the fridge door and almost has a heart attack when he sees Bruce seated at the island.

"B," he says, all the air rushing out of his lungs. His heart is pounding away in his chest, something dark and slimy writhing in him at the thought of Bruce having seen his dilemma in front of the fridge.

But then Bruce yawns and rubs at his eyes with a thumb and forefinger. "Did you just come in?" he says, voice rough with sleep.

Dick nods. There's an undercurrent of anxiety being pumped through his veins, just like there has been for the last few… well, if he really thinks about it, probably since he killed the Joker. It's like he and Bruce never truly recovered after that, because every step since then has been a mistake.

He wonders, even now, whether Bruce regretted adopting him after that. It'd been one of the things he'd selfishly clung to, and still clings to, though he knows that Bruce is a good enough person that he would (probably) never turn Dick out for that; he'd most likely try to rehabilitate him, or have him close to keep an eye on him.

"I tried calling you."

"I lost my phone. Think it fell into the crater." It's a little bit amusing how this reason for not answering sounds more made-up than all the times he'd given little white lies. *Wally was being really loud. Kory stole it for a day. Tim did something and now it doesn't ring when you call.*

"I'm sorry," Bruce says. "About Bludhaven. But it wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could've done."

Dick doesn't know what to say to that. He settles for nothing, instead walking over to the cupboard to get out his favourite cup. He holds it under the tap as it fills, then drinks it all in one go, effectively ploughing through the giant lump in his throat and serving as a way to fill the silence in the kitchen.

“Were you sleeping in here?” he asks when he’s finished, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He’s genuinely curious.

Bruce grimaces, and Dick recognises that look on his face that means the answer is something he doesn’t want to admit. “I was mostly waiting up for you,” he says, “but I think I dozed off because of the documents I was reading.”

“Case related?” Dick asks.

His back blocks the few rays of light that are filtering in through the long stretch of window, overlooking grassy stretches of land. From the distance, Dick thinks he hears a cow mooing, but chalks it up to his imagination, because none of their neighbours are close enough for him to hear a cow, and why would *Bruce* have one?

Bruce nods. “Connected to the group that caused your…” He waves a hand, gesturing to Dick. “I can fill you in after you’ve gotten some sleep.”

Dick nods. “Yeah, you should get some sleep,” he says. “You look terrible.”

Bruce smiles slightly, but it looks forced. “So do you,” he offers. “But we might as well turn in after breakfast.” He stands with a stretch, heading over to the fridge himself. “How hungry are you?”

Dick shrugs. “I’ll have whatever you’re having, as long as you aren’t cooking it yourself.”

Bruce grunts, a noise that Dick didn’t know he found *comforting* until Bruce apparently decided to stop doing it. “Breakfast food or dinner food?” he asks.

Dick ponders over the question. “Anything that’s not sweet,” he says finally.

Bruce glances at him, probably because Dick has a sweet tooth known to their whole family and beyond, but doesn’t question it. He shoves his head back inside the fridge and emerges with that casserole that Dick had seen moments ago and pulls it out.

Dick gets out plates and cutlery while it’s heating. Bruce, for some reason, has never been able to warm anything up without standing in front of the microwave staring at the food spinning around.

They silently move back to the island, Bruce sitting in his usual spot, and Dick in the barstool one down from his own. Something doesn’t feel right about sitting there right now. Soon, the quiet scraping of knives and forks against their plates is the only sound in the kitchen.

Dick’s glad they heated up the whole container, because he’s hungrier than he thought; he ends up going for thirds, the first two plates shoved into his mouth ravenously. It’s only afterwards that he realises that Bruce ate half a serving *ridiculously* slowly, probably only to keep him company. And it’s only later when he’s placing his plate in the dishwasher that he spots another one there, recently used.

“Donna’s alive,” Dick says halfway through the meal. “That’s, uh, why it took me so long. She’s in New York now; flew over for a visit.”

Bruce nods. “Yes, she returned around the same time as Jason, from what I recall.” He takes the tiniest of bites, moving his food around the plate. “There was an issue with the multiverse going on at the time.”

“I’m… glad?”

“Honestly? So am I,” Bruce tells him. His hands still, eyes going out the window to the blinding morning sun. “It’s selfish, I know, but I—”

“I know, B,” Dick says, and he does. It’s selfish, *so* selfish, but he can’t quantify in words how grateful he is to the universe for granting him this, for Donna and for Jason. And it makes a heavy stone of guilt sit in his stomach, right where the casserole went, because he knows what multiverse issues mean – hell, he knows what *any* issues mean, for them: a metric tonne of death and destruction.

There’s another lull in conversation as they clean up after eating. It doesn’t take very long, and some things feel the same as ever when Dick’s raised eyebrow is the thing that stops Bruce from making himself a pot of coffee.

Just before Dick’s about to head up to his room, Bruce speaks.

“Dick,” Bruce says, and his voice is faltering and tremulous, like he's working himself up to something. Dick immediately knows this is something he’s probably going to feel incredibly uncomfortable hearing. “I, I need you to know—you’re *safe* here, and this is your home, no matter how you feel, or what you’ve done, or… *anything*. No matter how your relationship is with me.”

There’s a stirring of memory in Dick’s mind that he pokes and prods at, because he’s certain that Bruce has never said anything like *this* to him, but it’s still *familiar* for some reason. He’s not even entirely sure he *believes* Bruce; Dick can smile and accept this all he wants now, but he’ll only know whether it’s conditional once something happens.

“Have we had this conversation before?” he says, voice lilting up in a hesitant question.

If anything, Bruce’s face grows more tense. “Sort of,” he says. “I had it with your… the previous age you were.”

It comes rushing back, as though all that'd been blocking this particular memory had been Dick’s reluctance to face it. Dick refuses to react to this new – yet always known – memory with any visible sign; he feels exposed enough as it is.

He doesn’t understand. Bruce knows about Blockbuster, about how Dick will go on to fail Bludhaven like he’s failed no other. How can Bruce say that *now*, of all times?

Some of this train of thought probably reflected in his body, because Bruce steps forward and places his hands on Dick’s shoulders. He looks straight into Dick’s eyes and bends his head down a little as he speaks: “I know you find that hard to believe, and I don’t blame you, what with my actions in the past. But this is *your* home, just as it is mine, and that will never change. No matter what.”

Dick takes a step back. “You mean, regardless of whether I killed someone,” he says, relieved when his voice doesn’t shake. “Is it because technically it was Catalina who killed him, because you were able to resurrect the Joker?”

“You would be welcome here even if you went out and massacred all of Gotham,” Bruce says in a fierce voice. “Your actions don’t change that. Or even,” he hesitates for a moment, voice softening once more, “even if you didn’t want to consider this your home any longer.”

“I don’t understand,” Dick says, now genuinely confused. “You have a *rule*, B.” His voice comes out on the border of unhinged, but he can’t help it. This is one of Batman’s rules that he’s been living by ever since he met him; Bruce can’t just go and pull the rug out from under him like this.

“I have a no-killing policy,” Bruce says, “but there are mainly two reasons for that. Firstly, for the sake of Batman, and what Batman is trying to do. I can’t just go around killing people and have the same relationship with the police force that I do. They wouldn’t trust me or work with me the way they do if I – or anyone associated with me or under me – started going around killing criminals.

“And secondly, for myself, personally. It’s a line *I* can’t cross, because if I did kill someone, I don’t know what I’d do. If I’d go off the rails, if I could ever live with myself, if I could ever stop from doing it again and again, and not just as a last resort. Nowhere in that does it say that you should be feeling as you are now about what happened with Blockbuster.”

“Bruce, you don’t understand,” Dick whispers. “These last few weeks, it’s been one mistake after another. I’m always one step behind. It *is* my fault, maybe not for the shooting itself, but for everything leading up to it. For Catalina being there. For not stopping her. I just *stood there*.”

“Some things are out of our hands,” Bruce tells him, brow furrowing a little.

Dick shakes his head frantically. It’s almost like he’s overcome with a wild urge to show Bruce the worst sides of himself, to test these new boundaries Bruce has just put in place. It feels almost *safer*, here in this time, to push against them. None of these things are happening to *him*; if this backfires, then at least he knows.

“But I was ready to *leave*,” Dick says, voice barely audible even to himself. “Before you called me into Gotham for help with the… the gang wars, I think. I was running around all over the place, wherever Catalina led me. I could’ve stopped her anytime I wanted, but I *didn’t*.”

Bruce is studying him, but for some reason, he hasn’t taken his hands away like Dick expected him to. “Dick,” he says slowly. “Nothing she did, or made you do, was your fault. I’ve looked at some of your accounts on the servers, spoken to Alfred. You were obviously unwell – *are* unwell.” When Dick frowns and goes to deny it, he adds, “Can you honestly tell me you’re okay? And I don’t mean physically.”

Part of Dick’s training as Robin had been extensive studying of psychology. Every time there’s a new finding, a change in understanding, another copy of the DSM released, Dick

will go over it with a fine-tooth comb, because their job isn't just *bashing up criminals*. It's *helping*.

Dick's just never turned that knowledge onto *himself.* When he doesn't say anything, Bruce lets out a breath.

"It's okay to not be okay. We're not perfect, and we shouldn't expect ourselves to be," he says. "I know I haven't told you that enough, but it's true. In our line of work, it's a given." He looks like he's about to say more, but then his phone buzzes a unique vibration pattern.

"Answer it," Dick says immediately. "Babs, right?"

Bruce nods, but doesn't look entirely happy about receiving the call. "Barbara," he says in greeting.

Dick's standing close enough to Bruce that he can hear Barbara's voice from the other end. Had it not been a case related call, he would've probably fled from the room.

"Bruce, I went through the data you sent me," she says. "And I have a list of very likely locations for bases. This is… *big*, B. Bigger than we thought it was."

"Thank you," Bruce says. "I'll look at them right now—"

Barbara snorts from the other end. "The very fact that you're up now means you didn't sleep. I'll send you the list in five hours."

With that, she hangs up.

Bruce frowns, looking down at the phone. Dick wishes he'd slipped out while Bruce had still been on the phone.

"I think I'll go up and try sleeping, as well," he says, and then he's out the door and into the corridor before he can see whether Bruce responded or not.

Dick doesn't bother with brushing his teeth, or a shower he's starting to very desperately need. He has spare blankets in the closet, so he pulls out two more atop the one already spread over the bed and crawls under them, wishing to lose himself from this confusing whirlwind of a day for a few hours.

Chapter End Notes

> it's funny, bc when i wrote the end of the last chapter, i didn't think much of dick not going back to the cave, but then a bunch of you were Very concerned w it and what had happened to him, and thus the Very Confronting discovery of what happened to BH was born ^~^ (but we got donna out of it so that's a win, right?)

massive high five to everyone who guessed the company's Sinister Plot =D all the theories were rly cool to read, and some just Shook my mind like yOUR MINDS. thank you all for sharing them w me =)

brief canon timeline that i'm using for things referenced in this chapter:
- Gotham Knights #21 (Dick's adoption is finalised)
- Joker: Last Laugh (Dick kills Joker)
- Titans/Young Justice: Graduation Day (Donna Troy dies, Dick quits the team)
- Nightwing #93-95 (Tarantula)
- Nightwing #95 (Bruce calls Dick in to help w War Games)
- Infinite Crisis #4 (Bludhaven hit by Chemo)
- Infinite Crisis Aftermath: Battle For Bludhaven (the Wall, nuclear explosion; I haven't read this myself btw)

I've plucked Dick out from the middle of Nightwing #95, before the marriage stuff happened. He only knows Bruce calls him in because of the reports.

EDIT: things that are not canon in this fic:
- the Gotham Clock Tower being destroyed permanently at the end of War Games.

thank you for reading! i hope you liked this chapter!

Chapter 6: VI

Chapter Notes

> Hi guys! Super sorry for the long wait. Assessments and midterms came up much faster than I'd anticipated and these last couple weeks have been rough. On that note, would you like me to give updates through Tumblr, so I don't completely disappear between chapters?
>
> Warnings: human trafficking stuff, but nothing too graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason doesn't quite know when it began, but at some point, he had realised that it'd been about a week since he'd had breakfast at his own place. He'd just started going to the Manor for Alfred's omelettes and never stopped to think about it.

The thought doesn't petrify him the same way it probably would've a couple of years ago. Instead, all it does is make his stomach growl slightly as he pulls up to the front door. He's missed a few mornings as his schedule grew more and more crowded, only dropping by before or after patrol, if at all. The fact that he now has a pretty significant amount of unsupervised minors to watch means that his main meals happen to and from the houses on his list.

There's a messy line-up of other vehicles strewn around the front, in absolutely no cohesive order. Jason can now tell what belongs to who. *That* frightens him a little more, as does the frankly horrific choices some of his siblings have.

There's the sleek black bike with bronze highlights, which belongs to Cass. Jason knows that Bruce will often build custom bikes for her, but the aesthetic of this one is too *Cass* to be another birthday present.

Parked… not exactly adjacent to it, but not opposite it either – *diagonal?* Jason questions – is the neon green car that Tim clearly took in to work at some point and then forgot to take inside to the garage. It has flames printed on the bonnet, starting at the base in blue chrome before gradually working its way into warmer colours, and the headlights have been modified to be blue. He somehow got Bruce's permission to use any car in Bruce's expansive garage.

Jason has no idea how he maintains said permission, considering the way he drives. He also doesn't know why Bruce has a car like *that*, because it's actually painful to look at.

Jason doesn't go in through the front doors. Instead, he heads down the little paved path, hidden slightly by rosebushes. It'd been this path that he'd walked (or ran) down every afternoon when he'd gotten home from school, but it's been so long since then – so worn

down by other memories now – that it doesn't hit him quite like it did the first few times he'd come through here.

There's a bicycle lying on its side, right by the door. The signs of actual human presence in the Manor – the sign of *kids* and *life* – is another thing that had stopped Jason in his tracks a lot at the start.

Now, he takes it more or less for granted that there'll be loud voices in the kitchen, a shouting match that makes him wince, the whistle of what appears to be a spatula flying through the air and slamming into the far wall with a wet *splat*.

They had also, at some point, negotiated for Alfred to have family breakfast off. It's a work in progress.

"Oi, brats," Jason calls loudly as he enters, bending down to undo his laces but making sure to be facing the inside of the house so no one can surprise him with an attack, "whoever threw that's gonna have to clean it up."

Normally, it's Dick who reinforces stuff like that. This last month or so, Jason's been picking up the slack, and with none of Dick's fine cajoling.

But Dick's sitting right there at the breakfast bar when Jason enters. It's *weird* now, because this version of Dick looks almost exactly like their one, plus minus a few eyebags and wrinkles here and there.

Damian marches over to the kitchen sink, grabbing the scrap of cloth that was there for messes, and heads to the wall that now had what appears to be batter of some kind. He loudly grumbles the entire way.

"So?" Jason says, throwing his jacket onto a nearby armchair and heading around to the stove. "Where's Bruce at? He's the one who called us here at asscrack dawn."

"Father is lurking in the downstairs study," Damian says.

Jason immediately knows why – this is probably the first breakfast they'll have since Jason and Bruce had *that* talk. He makes sure not to glance at Dick as he says to Damian, "This'll be a good learning experience, shrimp. Bribery is *key* to vigilantism."

Damian frowns. "You said that for learning to tie shoelaces," he says. "I don't see how that —"

Tim snorts, interrupting him. "You told him that *learning to tie your shoelace* is a key vigilante thing?"

"I think the more pressing concern here is that Damian couldn't tie his own laces till age eleven," Jason says.

Damian sniffs. "We had more pressing matters in the League," he says. "Lessons in how not to burn pancakes, for instance."

“My pancakes never—*fuck*.” The pancake on the stove is entirely blackened on one side. “Tell me *before* it burns, you absolute dandiprat.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason spots Dick mouth *dandiprat*. He’s been silent this whole time, and while Jason is curious, there’s a larger part that has absolutely no idea how to talk to this older version of his brother.

Damian has finished wiping the wall clean, just as Cass enters. She has on a hooded floor-length bathrobe, fluffy and orange. Jason watches Dick’s eyebrows rise to his shaggy hairline at the sight.

“Morning, Cass,” Tim says, slurping down his coffee.

Cass grunts at him, settling down in her seat and staring at Jason until he sighs and drops a couple of pancakes on the plate before her.

“Gremlin,” Jason mutters, but at this point, it’s routine for Cass to turn up in her giant bathrobe and grunt eerily like Bruce.

And then another figure comes bounding in through the door.

“Are those pancakes? Whoever’s making them, thank you from the bottomless pit of my heart,” Steph practically sings as she half-leaps onto the barstool beside Cass, placing herself between Cass and Tim.

“That,” Damian says, “is my seat.”

“And now it’s mine,” Steph answers cheerfully. “But if you can catch this strawberry in your mouth, you can win it back.”

Steph shoves her hand deep into her pocket and emerges with a surgical glove. She tosses it on the ground between herself and Damian; it travels about a quarter of the distance before flopping to the floor.

“I accept your gauntlet,” Damian says immediately, swooping in to grab it, “and Grayson throws.”

Normally, this would be an easy way for Damian to recover his seat. Because normally, Dick would toss the strawberry in a high arc, giving Damian all the time in the world to position himself.

Dick blinks in surprise at being mentioned. “Um,” he says hesitantly, glancing to Tim, who gives him a thumbs up.

“Peg it at him,” Tim suggests around a full mouth.

Jason throws a burnt piece of pancake at him. “Be nice,” he admonishes.

Tim lets out a huff of disbelief, spraying crumbs all over his plate, and Jason turns back to the stove before they can see his embarrassed flush. He’s beginning to sound like *Dick*.

“Ready?” he hears from behind him, followed by Damian’s impatient click of his tongue.

The others start up a drumroll, and Jason turns around just in time to see the slice of strawberry fly in a large arc over their heads and—

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jason demands. “I don’t care if you’ve gotten de-aged. You’re getting that down from there.” The kitchen is under *his* responsibility while Alfred is gone now that he's the oldest in this room, dammit, and he sure as hell isn't about to let a piece of fruit rot up there for them to find a month later.

Jason’s words are immediately followed up by two shouts of protest as Steph and Damian both demand another strawberry to be thrown, replacing the one stuck atop the overhanging tube of light.

“I’ll aim lower this time,” Dick says with an apologetic smile.

The strawberry lands perfectly in Damian’s mouth, with little need for him to account for anything. He swallows it down with a pleased smirk aimed at Steph.

“Fine, fine,” Steph says, easily swinging down and taking the spot beside Tim.

“Stephanie, right?” Dick says. “You’re…” He pauses, looking between her and Tim.

Tim’s eyes widen. “We’re not dating!” he says quickly. “We broke up. Ages ago.”

“Oh,” Dick says, looking as though he was relieved to not have asked it outright, “cool. Gotcha.”

“I’m dating Cass now,” Steph says brightly. “Moved on to the better sibling.”

In perfect sync, she and Cass fistbump, going behind Tim’s head as he mutters a little *hey!*

“Also cool,” Dick says.

Jason can’t blame him; it must be weird to be ambushed by family breakfast, especially when you only have vague memories of most of the people there. Has he even *met* Cass yet, in his time?

There are only five barstools around the kitchen island, so Jason grabs a plate of food and goes to the armchair by the window. Normally, Dick would join him, saying something about only kids eating at the table.

Tim joins him now, much to Jason’s surprise.

Bruce appears in the doorway with Damian appearing to have dragged him here, judging by the grip he has around Bruce’s wrist and forearm, pulling it up over Damian's shoulder like Bruce is a giant pillar to be lugged around. The thought of Damian finding out makes something twinge in Jason’s chest, but the thought of keeping it *hidden* doesn’t sit right either.

“Good morning,” Bruce says. It’s another change they’ve gotten used to over the last year – Bruce being actually coherent in the mornings. *The wonders of actual sleep for fucking once*.

Dick and Steph are the only ones who respond with actual words, Tim and Cass making vague noises. Bruce heads over to the stove, glancing around with a considerate eye. He heads straight for the pot of coffee, just like they all knew he would, and then he places two slices of bread in the toaster.

Damian frowns at this break in habit. “You’re behaving strangely today,” he says. Jason’s heard him use a less severe tone when accusing murderers.

Bruce glances up at him. “Hmm?” he says, clearly having missed Damian’s words.

“You never eat toast,” Steph supplies. “Like. In the four ish years I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you give off that you even knew what a toaster *does*.”

Bruce just looks confused now, which is another indication that he slept. “Well, it’s in the *name*,” he says. “It’s a *toaster*. It toasts.”

“I gotta agree with Steph here, B,” Dick says, chiming in without having to be brought into the conversation for the first time that morning. “I’ve known you for fifteen years, and I don’t think *I’ve* ever seen you give off that you even know what a toaster *is*.”

“Of course I know what a toaster is,” Bruce says. “Toasters are related to more than seven hundred deaths annually worldwide.”

There’s a moment of silence in the kitchen, before Tim says, “Wow. That’s got to be the most in character thing I’ve ever heard Bruce say.”

There’s a spot at the corner of the island where Bruce normally sits, but today he eats standing up, finishing his toast over the countertop and stepping towards the window while he gulps down his coffee.

“So,” Jason says. “What did you call us in for?”

It’s not like he has anything particularly pressing to do, but he’d like to not give off the impression (to Bruce, anyway) that everything’s suddenly alright. He just doesn’t know how to give the man the cold shoulder while still keeping things hidden from Damian until he figures out what to say to the kid.

Almost immediately, there’s a shift in the air as the inhabitants of the room suddenly transform into crime fighters. Tim, who’d been peering around Jason’s armchair to make faces at Damian, leans back. Cass’ head pokes up from her sleepy trance. Steph, who’d been slurping her glass of orange juice loudly, stops.

It’s really only Dick who remains unchanged, and Jason has to come to the sad conclusion that he never stepped *out* of that mode in the first place.

Bruce looks around at them at Jason’s question. Normally, had Alfred been present, *downstairs* conversation would be met with a thinly veiled warning look. Normally, no one

brings it up during these breakfasts anyway, wanting to spend time around each other without bringing up cases.

Jason's almost sorry to be breaking that unspoken rule.

"Barbara tracked down some locations," Bruce begins. A hint of stiffness seeps into his speech, any hints of the man who'd been dragged into breakfast by his youngest fading into the shadow of Batman. "From satellite images, we can confirm bases of operation in Dherain and Agolea."

"You said bases of operation," Tim says.

Bruce nods. "They're large, larger than their operations here, but not enough to account for the rest of the paper trail they've generated."

"But we're taking them down," Damian says. It's both a statement and a question; Jason suddenly wonders whether Bruce ever got around to filling Damian in on what they learned the night before.

Bruce hesitates. "Normally, yes," he begins, "but this time we have almost no other leads to go off on. There's no connection between any of their bases, from the papers we found; it's pure chance that these two locations were traceable."

"Which means they won't see us coming," Jason says. "We can go in, dismantle these branches, nab their paperwork—"

"We can't dismantle the branches," Tim says, just as Bruce opens his mouth as well. "The element of surprise is the biggest thing we have going for us right now."

Jason's eyes narrow. "And what do you intend to do if we find a whole warehouse of kids they're about to sell?" he demands.

Tim's mouth twists. "Look," he begins, but Bruce interrupts him.

"We start with recon," he says. "Our objective is to retrieve as much information as we can. Other locations and the formula they use in their drugs. If there are kids in there, then we get them out after that has been done. We'll be disguised as looters, local hooligans. With luck, they won't trace it to anything larger than a single, accidental hit."

Jason… well, Jason can't quite argue with that, because he knows that the price of going into these bases, breaking down the front door with guns blazing, is the best way to make the rest of the operation burrow down in their holes and disappear for at least a year. And despite everything, he *trusts* Bruce. He trusts him to have the best interests of the trafficked children.

And there's always comfort in the knowledge that, if all else fails, he can fix things himself.

With that thought comes the reminder of what happened the last time they went with one of his plans, and he firmly shoves it out of his mind, doing his best to stop his eyes from flicking towards Cass.

“Leaving tonight?” Cass asks, stifling a yawn with a sleeve of her outrageously bright robe.

Bruce nods. “I’ve just about readied the briefing,” he says. Then he turns to Steph. “Stephanie.”

“Bruce,” Stephanie mimics Bruce’s sombre tone. “I’m not going, am I?”

Bruce grimaces apologetically, the corners of his mouth turning down a little. “I need you in Gotham while we’re away,” he says. “We rarely have so many leaving at once. I’ve talked to Barbara – Dinah’s going to be here to help as well, and she’s having… negotiations with Huntress. And if you need anything—”

“Yell for Superman; I remember protocol.”

“He’ll be on standby.”

The rest of breakfast is finished as fast as they can work their way through the food, each eager for a chance to finally move forward in this case. Bruce is the one who loads the dishwasher, because he and Tim are the only two amongst them who are actually any good at it.

It’s only as they’re heading to the Cave that Jason remembers that Damian has *school*. He jogs forward a little to catch up to Bruce, catching him right as he nears the Batcomputer.

“Damian’s not coming, is he?” he says as quietly as he can, knowing how sound echoes in the Cave.

Bruce sighs. “This is safer than him following us by his own means. You know he won’t stand to be left behind. Any other case, maybe...”

But this time it involves Dick, and the people who hurt Dick. Jason swallows and looks away, knowing that Bruce is right but hating it all the same. Sometimes he looks at Damian and thinks about all that the kid’s missing out on, things he might come to regret in a decade’s time. And then he thinks about growing up an only child and being dead for his formative years, and decides that maybe this life that Damian has, being surrounded by a giant flock of family, isn’t the worst thing he could’ve ended up with. Better than still being with the League, at least.

Bruce waits until they’re all here.

“Our first base is in Dherain,” he begins. “Damian, Tim, and I will be going there. The Batplane will barely even need to be cloaked this time of year - the fog will be good cover. Jason and Cass, you two will be going to Darmania. I have the exact location in your briefing folders—”

“What about me?” Dick interrupts, edging himself forward from the back of the pack.

“Dick, you’re still—”

“B, you guys are underhanded enough as it is,” Dick argues. “Ignoring the age thing, I’m perfectly fine. And you guys *need* me, or at least, you need *someone*. Taking down a whole base that’s the size of this,” he waves his hand at a blueprint that’s up on one of the monitors, “isn’t easy for two people, no matter how skilled. And if you want it to be all covert, then it’s almost impossible to do in the time window you’ll probably have.”

There’s a pause as Bruce contemplates Dick’s mini speech. Then he says, “Fine. You’re with me and Damian. Tim, you’re with Cass and Jason.”

“I don’t need you to *babysit* me—”

Jason almost snorts in amusement; he hasn’t heard *that* tone since before he died. He wonders just how many fights Tim has been privy to; judging by the look on Damian’s face, *he’s* been exposed to none.

“You have an unknown substance in your system,” Bruce counters, “and I have the advantage of hindsight.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Bruce’s eyes turn sad, and he looks away. “Tim, I’ll fix up your—”

“I fixed up all the details, don’t worry,” Tim says absentmindedly, a stylus flicking away as he scrawls on the tablet in his hands.

Bruce opens his mouth, and then closes it again. “That’s everything, then.”

Jason walks to his favourite nook in the Cave to go over the blueprints and terrain in more detail. If he’s going to be heading out of Gotham for a few days, there are things he needs to take care of.

Dherain is located in south Europe. It would’ve been good for trade via sea, had it not been for the giant stretch of rocky crags that stick out in its only bay. There are lighthouses posted atop practically every mountain peak along the coastline, but despite them, hundreds of ships and fishing boats crash every year.

Dick’s done the reading, but the same can’t be said for the tiny cactus sitting two seats down from him. They’re lucky the Batplane Bruce now uses has the *space* for that; Dick remembers their planes from his Robin days, how Bruce accounted for each and every millimetre of space.

And this isn't even the *big* plane; there's another one in the Cave that Dick spotted before they'd taken off, which can apparently fit the 'whole' family, however many that is.

"Done?" Dick asks lightly, despite knowing the answer.

Damian glowers at him. "Part of my training regime is keeping up to date with every country in the world. This is merely a refresher."

Geez, Dick thinks, unsure if he's being serious. It's not entirely unbelievable that Bruce had had a kid with *Talia* (although Dick had secretly been surprised that it hadn't been with *Selina* first), and the more he observes Damian, the more he realises that this is a *child* who grew up in the *League of Assassins*.

He can forgive him for being a little prickly, especially considering he hasn't quite hit his growth spurt yet – for all his sharp words and heated glares, it's like being attacked by a kitten.

"Tim tells me you like art," Dick says, trying to start up a conversation. According to Tim, Damian *misses* him.

Damian is quiet. "It's a useful hobby," he says finally. He doesn't look at Dick.

Dick tries to put himself in Damian's shoes, unfamiliar as they are to him. He pokes and prods at his brain to see if anything comes out of that weird little hole that had supplied him with pieces of conversation and context from when he'd previously de-aged.

There's nothing there. Dick tries not to feel too frustrated. This is just a *kid*; he's *good* with kids, despite the fact that they're usually strangers.

But there's Lian, and he *knows* he's good with Lian, so surely that counts for something. Damian's just missing his older brother, and bringing up one of his hobbies when he seems to be a fairly closed off person might not have been the best way to go about this.

Dick tries for familiar ground.

"So you're Robin." It's an open-ended conversation starter, something that will hopefully be more successful than the art question had been.

"Yes. You made me Robin."

Dick opens his mouth, but it's a second before he can verbalise his thoughts. "I… Huh," he says, and then snorts. "That's a first. Y'know, I always thought that Tim would just… *retire*, instead of moving on to a new name. He seemed different from the rest of us. He actually has a family – well, *had* a family. I guess his father dying changed all that. So he grew up and moved on and you came in, huh?"

Damian looks distinctly uncomfortable, and doesn't respond. If anything, he looks even more closed off than before Dick had tried to strike a conversation.

Dick finally sighs and brings up the one topic he's been told to talk about. "So I hear you're good with a sword."

They're about half an hour into a discussion about the merits of a recurve bow when Bruce comes over from the cockpit. From out the window, Dick can see the approaching bay; it's lucky they're flying, or else this trip would probably have taken another hour just to get to the beach.

"We'll arrive in five," Bruce says. "Remember, recon *only*. We can't be going in with only half the information, no matter *what* we may see or hear."

"Got it, B," Dick says, as Damian says monotonously, "We understand, Father."

The Batplane lands in between two rocky slopes. At this time in the afternoon, the darkness hides it just as well as the clouds and mist. They'll turn on the cloaking feature before they set off, but it's barely necessary.

Even from inside, Dick can see that the barren landscape extends out as far as his vision goes. From the files, and from his own geographical knowledge of this area, he knows that the rest of the country is a lush green, that this area is so incredibly dead because of its history with chemical testing.

"Comms check," Bruce says, and immediately there's a loud ringing of feedback in Dick's ear.

He winces, and sees Damian do the same out of the corner of his eye.

Bruce looks apologetic. "Sorry," he mutters as he fiddles with the earpiece, and the noise slowly fades.

They're donned in dark black gear, entirely removed from their usual costumes and completely identical to one another's. Apparently, Bruce just had them *lying around*. Their usual face gear has been replaced with helmets that look like ski masks from the outside, but are equipped with about as much technology as Batman's cowl is.

Dick puts it on and grimaces at the feeling of his head being enclosed. It makes him think back to his Target helmet, which is still sitting—

No. No, it's *not* still sitting at the back of Dr Fledermau's closet, behind that false wall. There *is* no more apartment, no more building. The reminder hits Dick once more and he has to breathe for a moment before he can tune back in to what Bruce is saying.

Luckily, it doesn't seem like either of them noticed; definitely a benefit of these helmets. Just as he thinks that, Dick feels a phantom itching sensation in his ear and grimaces as the knowledge that he can't just *scratch* it threatens to overpower the feeling.

"…take the south wing," Bruce is saying, "and the two of you will enter through the north. I noticed some issues with the radio when we were flying overhead, so there may be interference with the comms. If anything happens, and you can't contact me or each other,

you will *exit* the building *immediately*. You will *not* come after me, because I can take care of myself. Is that clear?"

He's met with two sets of crossed arms and huffed breath.

Bruce looks at them, unyielding. "Nightwing," he says, and there's a tiny jolt of electricity in Dick's bones at the sound of Batman speaking to him. He's more alert in an instant. "Is that understood?"

Dick leans back against the wall. "Loud and clear, boss," he says, the familiar words flowing from his mouth. "Anything goes wrong, we bail on you and everyone else and make a wild dash for it."

Bruce sighs. "Robin," he says.

Damian stands straighter. "We will go in, take Corridor 3 and head through the second doorway. You will have the alarms disabled by then; if not, wait until they are or until there's verbal confirmation. We will retrieve the information using the USBs and upload them directly if we can get a clear signal, and then take a baseball bat to all the equipment and make it look like petty vandalism. We will make sure the criminals see us with spray paint as we leave. If something goes wrong, we leave immediately."

Bruce's face softens, a look of unmasked fondness seeping through his typically stoic exterior. Dick agrees – he would like to coo at this kid who just rattled off their entire battle plan. He wonders if giving in to the urge to ruffle Damian's hair is as good an idea as his brain is making it out to be.

"Alright," Bruce says. "You'll know when to enter."

And with that, he leaves. It's less dramatic than it usually is, now that there's no cape to follow him out.

Dick watches him go for a moment, before turning to Damian. "C'mon, let's get into position," he tells him. And then, before he can talk himself out of it, his hand darts out to tousle Damian's hair for a quick second, and he starts walking almost before Damian even realises what's happened.

The muffled squawk behind him makes his face split into a grin.

It had been going alright. Their blueprints had been perfect – this building didn't even look like it'd been dusted in the last decade, let alone undergone a structure change. It hadn't been

difficult to bypass all the security measures (not that there were very many) and get into the office slash security room.

Damian had darted towards the nearest computer, immediately plugging in the USB drive and getting to work, fingers a blur as he'd typed.

Dick, in the meantime had been rifling through the rest of the room, looking for anything that hadn't been digitised. He grimaces at the amount of paper that's beginning to pile up, but it's lucky that their technology is now so much better than it'd once been – he can just flick through the pages and the camera in his helmet will pick up everything and create a document based off the scans.

But no matter how efficient, it's still slower than they have time for.

Dick has finished a whole wall of cabinets, where one entire drawer had been filled with just grocery bills and furniture orders, when the security camera footage on the far side of the room draws his attention. It's been calm this whole time, with only the occasional individual moving down a corridor or, in one interesting occasion, stealing into the kitchen to grab a handful of apples, and disappearing into a supply closet.

Now, however, the cameras have shifted to show a group of five heading down a hallway. Dick pauses skimming through shipment listings as he heads over to the controls panel. He presses a few keys – once you've worked with one of these, you've worked with them all – and follows along as the group turn this way and that.

The best thing about Bruce's tech: it's *designed* for breaking and entering. If he squints at the screen, it'll zoom in and do its best through predictive algorithms to make the image clearer, even going so far as to run a stream of guesses for passcodes that are being entered.

It's been nice to have all the freedom in the world to build his own gadgets, but lately there's been no time. Hell, the only time he ever really had was when he was starting off; every 'update' since then has just been repairs.

Dick wants to ask Bruce how he finds the *time*. He wants to tell Bruce that he *gets* it now, a little more than he did back when he was fifteen and wondering why Bruce couldn't just take a night off from being Batman and Bruce Wayne. It's different, when you're operating with someone else, someone who's been doing this for longer than you have and whose city it *really* is, because you never shoulder the entirety of the blame yourself.

But this is just another one of those things that Dick will likely never verbalise. Not to Bruce, anyway, because the sheer awkwardness of that conversation will probably kill both of them.

"Done," Damian announces from the computer. A moment later, he wanders over to Dick, peering at the screen. "What is it?"

"Them." Dick nods to the screen in the upper left corner, where they've now wandered to. "Biggest group I've seen all night. Can't be a coincidence."

There's a pause. "Our instructions were recon only," Damian says a little reluctantly. Dick barely knows him, but it's clear form his tone that he doesn't want to let this go, either.

"It's not like we're interfering," Dick responds lightly. "Keep watching them. I'll finish up my end."

He's barely worked through the last of the shipments – and good *lord*, if he were to man a ship, he'd at least have some *creativity* in naming it – when Damian's posture changes. It's not something Dick probably would've noticed, had they not been on a mission. Had he not been trained from childhood to notice absolutely *everything* around him.

"What?" he says, walking over.

Damian steps over to the control panel. "They've disappeared into a restricted area," he says. "We can't see the cameras without clearance."

"I can get us in," Dick says instantly.

He sidles in next to Damian, and they both know that time is running out and Bruce will be pissed, but he can't help it. It's not as easy getting in as he'd probably made it seem, but with the use of their codebreaker, it's simpler than it would've been.

There's a chance they'll know it's been hacked. But they've gotten everything they needed from the system. They're looking to be spotted now anyway.

Damian sucks in a breath when Dick finally gets the cameras up. A row of cells are now displayed on the upper row of screens; the group that Dick had been following is standing at a station at the far end of this room looking at something on a screen. Try as he might, Dick can't make out anything on the screen; the technology in the room is just too old – it's a wonder they're accessible from here at all.

"We can't leave them," Damian says, eyes trained on the teenagers in the cages. There must be at least a dozen, and that's based off the range of the cameras alone.

They won't be able to cover a second break-in with the same tactics they used this time. Security will rise, and it'd be *weird* for vandals to revisit so soon. Anything they do has to be done *now*.

"Of course not," Dick says.

Vandalism, Dick reflects, is much more fun than it has any right to be. They've brought along baseball bats, in the holders that typically carry broadswords.

He and Damian start by wrecking the control room. The cabinets are upended, papers strewn all over the place, before they graffiti derogatory images all over the place.

“This therapeutic?” Dick asks Damian breathlessly. Smashing equipment takes *effort*.

“My five years of enduring the American education system is finally being put to use,” Damian responds, spray-painting a giant penis on the wall.

“Okay, they’re heading this way,” Dick says. “Your comms still down?”

Damian nods. A stream of guards race inside, the first one crashing to a halt in the centre of the room and the others reacting similarly. The two of them slip out as the guards are still reeling from the damage wreaked, and it’s only after they’ve locked the door with a pair of handcuffs that there’s a shout from inside.

The jog to the hallway they need to get to would’ve been faster, had they not had to smash every window they found on the way there. There’s a burst of static in Dick’s ear, and he turns the volume down a little when he sees that it isn’t stopping.

A glance to Damian shows that he, too, knows that Bruce is probably signalling to them that it’s time to get out. They go forward anyway.

“Duck,” Damian says suddenly, and Dick drops to the floor only to see an approaching squad of security guards.

There’s a muffled curse from behind him and in the next second, just before they’ve reached Dick, Damian is right back at his side.

“I ducked,” Dick mutters, even as he swings with the bat.

“My fault,” Damian says, but his voice is anything but apologetic. “It’s… an inside code. From after your time.”

Oh. Really, it’s a wonder that they’re *this* far into the mission before something like this reared its head. Dick wants to know what it meant, where it’d come from. What did Damian mean, an inside code? All the code words they have Dick passed onto Tim; he assumes Bruce did the same thing to Jason, because the few times they worked together, Jason had understood them perfectly.

Dick does his best to swing for places that won’t do permanent damage, just remove them from the playing field. Damian is at his back, anticipating his every move. It’s… something else, to work with the kid. His movements are fluid and confident; Dick wouldn’t call it *dancing*, exactly, but there’s a fluidity to it that’s beautiful in itself.

The guards are wearing eye protection, so Dick has no qualms about spraying paint onto them. The first guard he does it to lets out a surprised yelp, immediately moving backwards in an attempt to get away from the bright yellow paint that’s now coating his goggles.

Damian has taken the vandalism to a whole new level, painting over the bodies of the guards lying on the ground in a heap. Dick squints even as he ducks away from the path of a taser.

“What even is that?” he says, one of the few phrases he can speak in Dhernian.

Dick can tell by Damian’s eyes that he’s smirking, even as he doesn’t answer.

“Come,” Damian says instead.

They round the corner to the final door between them and the cages. Damian sprays a giant turkey on the wall, conveniently covering the security camera as well, while Dick keys in the code. The second the door unlocks, he smashes the control panel with his bat.

Immediately, a blaring alarm sounds.

“Fuck,” Dick says with feeling, even as he and Damian enter.

The static in his ears have grown, but the earpiece must be malfunctioning, because it’s definitely turned off.

It’s even more confronting to be in here. The gazes of about twenty people, all mid-teens, train on them the second they enter. It’s only sheer luck that the group they had been tracking aren’t there anymore.

“It’s okay,” Dick says, trying for a reassuring look as he walks by all of them to the wall at the very back, where the power board is. This has to be the most high-tech room this place *has*, even if the cameras and room itself are older than Alfred. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

He rotates through languages, hoping that even if they don’t understand his words, they’ll hear the tone.

“Get them out,” Damian says. “I’ll handle the cover.”

Freeing everyone is a simple matter of switching off power – and also backup power – to the room. Everything turns dark, and Dick grabs his torch from his belt, shining it around. He’s met with terrified faces.

Another torch turns on; Damian opens up a cage on the far end, reassuring the boy in there. With his words, other cages open up, and pretty soon, the entire room is standing out.

“Follow us,” Dick says, gesturing with his hand.

Damian, in the meantime, has handed his baseball bat to the first teen he’d freed, who is now smashing things to his heart’s content. His attempts are weak, much weaker than theirs had been, but his heart is in there and it’s one more task off their hands. Dick does the same.

Now they have to get themselves and twenty teenagers out of this place. Their exit was supposed to be have been through the front gates and then out over the fence; they don’t have the time to create another.

“Lead,” he says to Damian. “I’ll bring up the rear.”

Damian doesn't argue. He starts off at a jog, but it quickly dwindles back down to a walk when they find the two kids who're limping. Dick carries one; the other is supported by Damian.

It's the absolute worst time for Dick's head to be spinning the way it is; he probably didn't have the filters in the mask on to get rid of the fumes from the spray cans.

There's a shout from behind him and a rush of footsteps. Dick quickly deposits the boy in his arms onto the nearest person and turns around, baseball bat at the ready.

There are three guards this time; he has no idea how they're going to pretend like this was typical vandalism now, with this rescue, but they'll get to that bridge later. Right now, he needs to worry about getting all of them out of here in one piece, and that means hitting each of these guards in the ribs and thighs and stealing their tasers to turn against them. He's never missed his escrima sticks more.

There's a beeping in Dick's ear, and he frowns, because there's still a buzzing sensation in his head, but the sound from the comms seems clear enough.

"Where are you?" Damian pants, and there's the sound of an object hitting flesh.

"On my way to you right now," Dick responds. How had they gone that far in the minute he'd needed to take down the guards?

He races down the dim corridor just in time to see the kids ganging up on the five guards who had apparently thought that going up against twenty-one teens they'd held captive was a good idea. Dick tases the last one, and nods to Damian.

The boy he'd been carrying before has been propped up against a wall, and there are two other kids standing beside him protectively.

"I got it," Dick said. He crouches down and lifts him back up again; the boy stirs. "Hey. What's your name?"

The boy coughs a little. "Derek," he responds in Spanish. His eyes are bloodshot. "Who are you?"

"Honestly?" Dick lets out a high-pitched laugh, as different to his own as he can realistically fake. "We were just here to bash things up. Then found you lot."

"Oh." It seems that Derek's energy has run out, because he slumps back against Dick's shoulder.

Dick frowns. There are no visible signs of injury, and the other kids all seem to be doing fine, more or less. Is this just a lack of food? Has he been here longer than the rest?

There's another buzzing in Dick's ear.

"Where are you." Bruce's voice is a tight growl.

“We went a little off track,” Dick responds. He’s lucky Derek is so out of it. “Nearing the exit now.”

“You’re ten minutes late,” Bruce says.

“Like I said, we went a little off track, but we’re back now. Mostly.” Damian is smashing through another control panel. “Also, uh, it might be helpful if you could call the local cops in. Also a couple of ambulances.”

“Why.”

“Rescue,” Dick says, before he stops dead in his tracks.

This is the final lobby before they’re free of the building. It should come as no surprise that there’s a massive flock of guards standing between them and the exit.

Had they been like the other guards, this would’ve been relatively simple. But word has definitely gone around, because there are steel shutters that came down the second Dick came through the door, and there are guns trained on them from all around.

“Scratch that,” Dick murmurs. “We’re going to be a lot later than anticipated.”

One of the guards speaks in heavily accented English. “Put down your weapons,” he orders. “And we won’t harm you.”

Damian snorts so loud that he probably pops a blood vessel. “You had children in cages,” he responds in Macedonian. “You’ll kill us to keep us quiet.”

“They’re here for medical treatment. This has pushed back their recovery for *months*” the guard snaps. “We will not press charges against the two of you. You can go home. Drop your weapons. Walk out.”

“Do as he says,” Bruce says suddenly through their main channel over the comms. “I need a hole.”

Damian plays the part perfectly, nodding in hesitation and turning to Dick pleadingly. Dick gives in immediately, placing Derek to the ground. The kids all around them turn and stare in fear and betrayal, some even screaming.

The girl who yells something to Dick’s retreating back is tasered the second Dick isn’t looking; he can hear the buzz and thump as she falls, but he continues to the steel gate that they’ve cracked open slightly, anticipating Damian.

The second the door opens slightly, a figure in dark clothing leaps in and tosses two tiny pellets. Gas erupts in the room, and there are shouts all over the place as guards try frantically to get their masks on.

Dick turns, dropkicking the nearest security guard and shoving his gun across the floor. Bruce used a knock-out gas; the kids are all out, with no masks to protect them, and there are a fair

number of security guards who didn't get a chance to put on theirs – or didn't have masks – who are also slumped on the floor.

Unfortunately, there's still a significant number that are awake. The haze makes up for it, though. It coats any security cameras, hiding their movements as they go through and take down the remaining guards.

"Freeze!" someone yells from Dick's left, and he turns in an instant, reflexes working on overdrive.

There's a guard with a gun in each hand, and a look on his face like he's all too prepared to use both of them.

"Anyone move, I shoot!"

There are only three guards left now; Dick can't differentiate between them and Bruce and Damian, but he knows that they're there.

No one moves; in this haze, the guards can't guarantee that their actions won't be interpreted as hostile.

"I'll play mouse," Dick says, and without waiting for an answer, he leaps upwards and into a somersault.

The second he moves, there's an eruption of gunfire. It goes on for only a moment before someone takes him out, and there's dead silence once more. Dick pants slightly from where he's kneeling by the far wall, away from all the unconscious bodies.

The sound of sirens draws closer. They need to be gone before the cops get here.

Someone is coming over to Dick. Dick rises to meet them. There's a wave of vertigo as he does so, which is… unusual, to say the least. Dick can't remember the last time he felt vertigo from something as simple as a flip.

"—eed to go!" Bruce's hand at his elbow and his body is moving before he's even fully aware of it.

Damian is ahead as the three of them slink out of the entrance, keeping to the shadows. Dick can hear officers speaking over the radio, Dhernian words too rapid for him to be able to piece together. A moment later, ambulances pull up, but by then, they're already over the fence.

Dick presses a few buttons to let natural air into his helmet, not yet daring to take it off entirely just yet. He can already feel the waves of anger coming off of Bruce, and he sighs inwardly as he resigns himself to hearing a lecture when they get back to the plane.

The hike back is long, made longer by the fact that, while there aren't any major injuries, he and Damian haven't come out of this unscathed. Dick can feel where bruises will definitely be popping up in the morning, not to mention the buzzing headache he now has.

The Batplane is a welcome sight; Dick lets out a relieved breath as they approach it. The moment they step inside, Bruce is at the controls, steering them up into the sky.

“We’re leaving?” Damian asks, yanking off his helmet. His hair is sweaty beneath it, standing up in weird tufts here and there while the rest is matted to his head.

Bruce nods. “After the way that ended, there’s nothing more we can do there. Not without raising suspicions.”

Here it comes, Dick thinks. He half collapses into a nearby chair and tugs at the helmet until it’s off. “B,” he begins. “We couldn’t just *leave* them there. Not after we saw them.”

Bruce doesn’t say anything, but Dick can see his knuckles whiten around the curve of the armrest of the chair. Dick swallows. Bruce’s anger is one thing, but his disappointment is another. He could always handle the first, but it’s the latter that plagues him well into the night.

“You were hit!” There are hands on his face, tilting his head to the side.

“What?” Dick pushes at Damian half-heartedly. “No, I wasn’t. I was wearing a *helmet* the entire time. There’s no way…” His voice trails off as he sees Damian’s fingertips come away red.

Dick stands abruptly, teetering slightly as he makes for the bathroom mirror. Sure enough, there’s a trail of red trickling down from his ear and down the neck of his shirt.

“Huh,” he says, craning his head to look at it. He’s about to poke a finger into his ear to see if there’s a cut or something when Damian whacks at his hand.

“Sit,” he snaps.

Bruce has put the plane on autopilot now that they’re well into the air. He frowns quizzically at the side of Dick’s head, fingers quick to tilt his head a little.

“Any blows to the—”

“*Nothing*, B,” Dick says. “Look, it’s probably just… the earpiece or something with the helmet. Maybe you were just really loud over the comms.”

Bruce grunts a little. “Wipe,” he says to Damian.

Dick holds himself still as Bruce clears the dried blood around his ear. There’s silence when he stops.

“What?” Dick says.

“We’ll have to run tests when we get back,” Bruce says. “You probably tore your eardrum. You were dizzy before.” It’s more of a statement, but Dick hums a reluctant *yes* anyway.

“Could it be a side effect?” Damian asks. There’s an expression on his face that Dick doesn’t recognise. “Of the serum.”

“We’ll run tests,” Bruce says again. His hand is heavy on Dick’s shoulder. “You’ll be fine.”

Dick wants to protest that it’s just a little bit of blood – they’re around loud noises all the time; a burst eardrum is probably just another initiation thing at this point – but he can’t deny that this feels nothing like a typical burst or ruptured eardrum.

“I hope the others are having fun,” he comments.

Chapter End Notes

~~every time i write plot related sections in this fic i transform into that kronk meme~~

Damian spray painting the guards' bodies is a reference to this amazing scene, if anyone picked up on that ^~^

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed!!

Chapter 7: VII

Chapter Notes

No new warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Dick were here, Tim reflects, he would've made some remark about the middle kids being let out into the wild.

Of course, had Dick been here, it wouldn't be the middle kids; it would just be 'the kids minus Damian'.

Right now, though, Tim doesn't feel particularly happy with either Jason *or* Cass, because (firstly) they still won't tell him the full story of the night they rescued Dick, and (secondly) it seems that Jason's projection of what he thinks *Cass* thinks is influencing how he acts around her, which in turn affects how Cass acts towards *Jason*. It's going around in a circle and Tim's sick of it, because he hadn't even experienced this in high school, of all places.

That, and the fact that Tim had thought that he and Cass were close enough to tell each other everything.

When he glances up from the cockpit of their plane, it's to frown in irritation at the quiet figures of his siblings as they sit, faces buried in the briefing files. He knows that they've both already gone through it. Besides, Cass prefers audio recordings of anything important.

"We're about fifteen minutes away," Tim reports, finally breaking the silence. "So I figure we should run through our plan of attack."

Two heads snap upwards.

"Who made you the leader," Jason mutters, arms crossed.

A year or so ago, Tim would've seen this as a snarky comment; now, he shoots Jason a withering look.

"I flew us here; ergo, I lead," Tim says.

"You flew us here because, for some reason, Bruce thinks you're responsible," Jason counters.

A munching sound starts up just as Tim is about to respond, and he flicks his gaze towards Cass, raising an eyebrow.

Cass shrugs, but doesn't stop munching on the bowl of food in her hands. Where had she even *gotten* a bowl, Tim wonders?

"Rule one of crime fighting," Cass says with a full mouth. "Never go in with an empty stomach."

"You ate a whole chicken before we got here," Jason says incredulously.

Cass chews loudly in his direction, open mouth and all, and that, for some reason thaws out the plane faster than any ice breaker activity Tim's ever tried to do at WE.

"Okay, so there's this great mountain peak overlooking the base," Tim begins, pulling up maps on the screen. "It's going to be light for about twenty minutes after we arrive, so I figure, perfect time for reconnaissance."

Cass nods. "I have the binocular prototypes," she says. She forms the latter two words just slightly slower than the rest, her pronunciation absolutely textbook.

Tim nods. "Great," he says. He's been looking forward to using those for *weeks,* but so far, nothing has happened in Gotham to warrant it.

Jason cuts in. "I looked up the missing people reports over the years. From that, there's sort of a pattern…" He taps a few buttons, and then the screen is mirroring his tablet. "And coincidentally, this happened three nights ago."

"Missing people reports spike in the middle of every month," Cass says, frowning at the data. "For the last five years."

"A lot of people aren't reported missing, a lot of people no one would notice go missing," Tim lists, "but those are pretty damning figures."

Jason nods. "So what I'm saying is—"

Cass rolls her eyes. "We won't leave any hostages," she says, the *duh* in her voice loud and clear.

Tim wouldn't have overheard them speaking if he hadn't had to double back because one of his shoelaces snapped. He freezes at the door of the Batplane, slinking back to try and melt into the plane's dark frame as much as possible.

He's lucky it's a verbal discussion.

"…blame you for it," Cass is saying. "You did what you had to. He'll be fine."

Tim hears Jason sigh, and his voice is lower than Cass' when he speaks. Combined with Jason's rumbling tone, it's harder to piece together what he's saying. "…if I were him… through a *lot*, and all this… with Bruce, too... really ties the knot, y'know..."

This is getting *juicy*, Tim realises, and he steps closer to the doorway, practically lying beneath the ramp. It's only slightly an improvement. He turns up the hearing aids in the mask as much as he can.

Jason is still speaking. "…better in the open, obviously," he's saying, "…dunno, Cassie. And I know you don't really—we've never really had the chance to click, y'know? I know how you feel about my 'methods', and—"

Cass interrupts him. "I talked with him about you," she says, and Tim can practically *hear* Jason blanch at the thought. "I'm… I don't. Approve. But you're my brother. And my friend, too, I hope. Or getting there. I'm okay with it on the same terms. Talking with him about it helped, a lot."

"*Fuck*," Jason says in relief, the word muffled against something. "I thought…"

Tim thinks that perhaps Jason really does trail off this time, because Cass says, "That was you projecting," in a voice that immediately lightens the conversation.

Jason lets out a barely-there chuckle, and Tim only has a millisecond to throw himself out from where he's been eavesdropping before Cass walks out.

She raises an eyebrow when she sees him; even the blind would be able to read Tim like a children's book right now.

"You guys ready?" he asks hastily, darting in to look through their spare supplies. He yanks out another pair of black boots, neatly removing the laces and replacing his own.

Jason joins them then. "C'mon, twerps," he says.

"We're all almost the same age," Tim says. "You can't call us that."

Jason shrugs. "Yeah, I can. Twerp." Any signs of the emotional conversation he and Cass just had are completely wiped away.

They can't get into a scuffle now, but Tim will make sure that Jason knows who it was when he next attacks his digital footprint.

It's only about a kilometre or so to the base. Darmania is… well, it's humid as hell, firstly. Tim isn't a fan of this weather – he's accustomed to Gotham winters, to staying awake during cold nights in cold houses, sleeping in the dark empty corners. It's hard to break habits like that, even though he's been living in the Manor for about five or six years now.

But it makes for alright scouting, he supposes as they near the peak they chose from above. Though what he had called a mountain is practically a rocky hill.

This is about as close as they can get to the base, which isn't at all what comes to mind when Tim thinks of *evil villain hideout*. For starters, it's a one-storied building, and the external panelling is entirely wood. There are no paved roads, and through the binoculars, he can make out signs that warn off hunters; for all intents and purposes, this could be an environmentally aware science lab. Perhaps even an eccentric billionaire's island hideaway. It's not really Lex Luthor's style, but Tim is *sure* Bruce has a few of them around here and there.

From their blueprints, there are exactly two exits. For a building this massive, it's a little terrifying. Only one of the exits is advertised openly – there are large shutters, opening up into what Tim assumes is a garage of some kind. There's another 'shutter' at the end of a dirt road, but the blueprints show this as a solid wall.

"Movement," Cass says. "Eight o'clock."

Tim turns his binoculars to the left, observing as a truck drives up to the garage. He zooms in, safe in the knowledge that his helmet is recording everything. The truck's numberplate looks like one of those newfangled digital ones, and as Tim watches, the numbers flicker and disappear.

"That's not suspicious at all," he mutters, spinning the dials to zoom further in. He wants as much of a view of the inside of the garage as he can get.

These new binoculars are a *treasure.* He's got to look for a good enough case when they're back in Gotham for a chance to test out all the features.

The shutters open, and a man in grey slacks and a spotless white shirt comes out. Tim has never seen him before; the second he gets home, he'll add facial recognition software to the ski masks they're using for this op. Maybe the next binocular upgrade could have that, too.

Tim forces his gaze away from the man, knowing that Cass will have eyes on him. He zooms in as far as he can to get a look inside the building as the shutters open, letting out a frustrated curse when the only thing that's visible in the gloom are the walls.

Cass bumps her foot against his lightly; Tim takes a breath and focuses.

There are more people outside now, loading crates into the truck. The crates are completely unlabelled, all apart from the 'FRAGILE' that's printed on all sides. Tim isn't completely sure they're drugs, but he's *pretty* sure they're drugs.

"Going dark for a second," Tim mutters, pulling out his tablet to get the facial recognition software up and running.

Jason grunts in affirmation. Someday, when the comparison won't seem as bad, Tim's going to tell him that he's turning into Bruce. Just not anytime soon.

"David Attila," Tim says. "The driver. He works at a convenience store. Social media account is relatively clean… private account is alright… private *private* account has a *tonne* of drugs, nudes that I *really* didn't need to see… he's got multiple posts about vandalising buildings."

“Dumbass,” Jason says from beside him. “Hey, truck's moving.”

“Batgirl,” Tim says, and Cass is moving at a fast sprint to catch up to the truck.

Tim goes back to watching the compound, but now there’s a niggling in the back of his mind because one third of their team is separated from them, and who *knows* what could happen. After Dick being captured, and *still* feeling those repercussions, he can’t really curb the weight that’s settling in his stomach at Cass going off into a new country with no backup.

Tim takes a breath and tries to remember that this is *Cass*. If Cass can beat Shiva, she can beat whatever a truck driver and foreign country can throw at her.

“Fuck,” Jason mutters. “I think they spotted us.”

“What?” Tim doesn’t move his body other than to flick the binoculars around. “How?”

“Don’t fucking know.” Jason’s voice is strained, and his body is a live wire beside Tim. And then he *shoves* Tim. “*Move!”*

Tim rolls away on instinct, and only a second later, there's a whistling sound and the hill they’re on shakes slightly. The ledge where they had been gives way, dirt and rocks crumbling down in a mini, controlled avalanche. Tim grabs on to the tree trunk beside him, waiting for the earth to settle.

There's a stillness in the air, and that's when Tim loosens his grip. He holds his breath and hopes the slight upturn hides the two of them; Tim glances at Jason for only a moment, and sees him mirroring Tim on the other side of the fissure.

Had they fired a *grenade* or something at the two of them?

Who even *did* that, Tim thinks with not a small amount of irritability. They could’ve been *anyone*, from a local hiker to a tourist. What did it mean if they weren't cautious about covering their tracks or stragglers going about reporting weird behaviour here?

They needed to go through town and question locals, Tim knows.

“They’ll be coming to investigate,” Tim says. “We need to go.”

Jason’s moving almost before he’s spoken. On their hands and knees, they mess up any signs of human presence, scuffing up footprints and refilling the little holes their elbows have dug into the pliant soil.

The way back down the slope is the longer path, the one they’d plotted out for when they were going to be infiltrating the actual base itself. But this is the only other route they know reasonably well, and the one they’d taken on the way up is now filled with loud footsteps, in perfect sync.

Tim and Jason crouch behind a scraggly twig of a tree and peer at the group of people all donned in uniforms of security guard slash army personnel. Their footsteps are loud enough to imitate a horde of elephants.

“Crazy stupid idea,” Tim says as they’re continuing back down, “but this is the perfect opportunity to break in.”

Jason makes a noise. “That’s—fuck, I can’t believe you’re making me be the voice of reason here.”

“The door is *right* there, we have all the tech and gear we need, and there’s a giant group of people out right now which means less on the inside. The only thing that would be better is if we had BG.”

“We’re *down* a person, arguably our strongest. I’d say that’s a pretty big fucking reason to not go now—”

“I’m going whether you like it or not,” Tim hisses.

They’re at the base of the hill, which extends to the electric fence that surrounds the facility. Tim hunches behind a bush and glances towards the security camera; within seconds, he’s into their system and relieved beyond words that it’s all connected through their intranet. He *hates* when people don’t update their cameras.

“One minute blind spot,” Tim reports, not looking at Jason, “in three, two, one—”

He makes a wild dash forward, grabbing the fence and climbing up as fast as he can. The barbed wires at the top make getting over a little bit tedious, but their clothes offer more protection than civilian gear.

Tim’s more than a little relieved to see Jason beside him as he lands. It’s not like this would’ve been his first op alone, but it’s always better when he has a partner with him.

They make it to the garage unseen – or so Tim hopes. The room is still about as interesting as it had seemed from a distance. It’s obviously a loading dock of sorts; there are forklifts along the side, empty crates stacked along another.

Tim would’ve darted to the door leading inside had he not been yanked over to a supply closet by Jason.

“Change,” Jason says shortly.

It’s becoming increasingly clear that Jason’s probably pissed at him, but Tim can deal with that after all this.

They don’t bother with changing their pants – they’re generic enough, and it would take too long to move everything that’s in their pockets. The two of them slip on the long white labcoats and do up the buttons to hide the fact that they have Kevlar beneath it.

The worst part of this is taking off the ski masks, because they won’t be able to come back for them. They grab the comms units out from inside them, and set the helmets to self-destruct. The helmets implode quietly inside the giant chemical waste bins as Tim jogs over to the door, plugging up his codebreaker to it.

The door swings open. Now all they have to do is blend in until they've scoped out this place well enough. Hopefully Cass won't need backup anytime soon.

The door opens in a long hallway. It isn't nearly as creepy as Tim had been envisioning it; there are even little plants by every doorway. The floors are carpeted, which makes Tim think that they're probably in more of the admin side of things.

"Maybe there was another door to the main building," Jason murmurs, evidently thinking the same thing.

Tim's mind flicks to the blueprint. "Two lefts and a right, and we should be on the other corner of the compound," he says.

Jason nods, not saying anything more. He'd found a hairnet and is wearing it in an effort to make the white streak in his hair less visible – Jason has been using a wig on undercover missions, Tim knows, because so far any dye he's used to cover it up has just melted straight off in a matter of minutes.

They can't run through here, no matter how much Tim wants to. They take a turn into what seems like a mess hall of sorts – perhaps for staff? – and quickly continue on their way, but not without receiving some looks.

"We need to hurry it up," Jason says under his breath, voice strained.

"I *know*," Tim shoots back.

Another few steps and it's becoming clear that someone's following them. Tim risks a glance behind him, feigning tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. Behind them is a woman wearing exactly the same thing they are, but with a swipe card hanging from her neck.

"Bathroom up ahead," Tim murmurs in the middle of the very loud and very fake conversation they're carrying on.

Jason's words don't give any indication that Tim has spoken. They arrive at the bathroom, neatly entering inside. Jason hides behind the door while Tim stands in front of the lone basin. Not even a second has passed before the door opens once more.

Tim glances up to look at her in the mirror, and then feigns a surprised jump. But before he can say anything, the woman speaks.

"Who are you," she demands. "You don't work here."

Tim looked at her with wide eyes, imitating the new employee terror he's seen on so many faces. "It's my first day," he stutters. "Am I doing something wrong—is this a senior bathroom? Am I not supposed to be in here?"

Tim knows from one look on her face that she isn't buying it.

"*I'm* the one who hires new people," she says, looming closer and closer to Tim.

“Huh,” Tim says, facade disappearing. “You ever think that maybe they replaced you?”

A look of outrage fills her face but she’s unconscious before she can say anything more. Tim leaps forward to catch her before she falls. They remove the card from around her neck, Jason putting it on.

"Should we just put her in a stall?" Tim says.

Jason shrugs, but helps him lug her unconscious form inside. She's already stirring; they don't have long.

They dart through the building now, walking as fast as they can without drawing unwanted attention. The place isn’t *brimming* with employees, but it’s far from empty.

“Maybe we should just set off the fire alarm,” Tim suggests.

“Last resort only.” Jason glances at his watch. “We’ve been in here eight minutes.”

The main server room has two employees in there, sitting on opposite ends of the room with headphones in. Jason enters first, and Tim carefully shuts the door behind him.

One of them takes off her headphones. “Who are you?” she questions, a frown on her face. “No one’s allowed in here but us.”

“We’re the new recruits,” Jason says as he steps closer, and before Tim can blink, his hand whips out and delivers a precise blow to her head. She’s out immediately.

The only issue is that her hand falls on the giant red panic button and alarms begin blaring instantly.

Tim takes care of the other employee just as fast while Jason shoves the woman away from in front of the monitors, frantically typing to try and turn off the earpiercing sirens that are going off. Tim doesn’t even bother trying to disable the alarm. He jams a USB into the nearest computer and starts transferring data while giving their system a virus.

“We need to get out,” Jason says. He snaps, “*Red!”* when Tim keeps typing.

“One second,” Tim murmurs.

His fingers are a blur over the keyboard, gather as much information as he can. He needs another minute, just one. He *needs* to do this, needs this mission to be successful and to get this data to analyse and suss out the rest of this godforsaken group. His actions can't have ruined this whole operation; he won't let that happen.

“Red,” Jason growls now. “Five fucking seconds.”

Tim yanks out the USB. “Done,” he says. “C’mon, hit that fire alarm button.”

“There isn’t one in here,” Jason says. “We just gotta make a run for it.”

They'd examined the schematics of this place before they'd left Gotham. The sewage system was abysmal; it was a wonder the pipes didn't get clogged up every week. But more importantly, the vents were too small to crawl through. That's all that's running through Tim's mind as he and Jason walk as calmly as they can out of the main server room. There's absolutely no crawl space that they can exploit.

There's a burst of static in Tim's ear, and then nothing. Frowning, he presses a hand to the comms unit – rookie move right there – and finds no response from the other end.

"BG?" he tries anyway.

"No signal in here, I don't think." Jason's voice is grim, and Tim can practically feel the waves of anger rolling off him.

Tim's about to respond, when they turn a corner and are suddenly faced with a wall of security guards.

"Guess they finished searching the hill they blew up," Tim says, glancing at Jason.

"Run," is all Jason says, and Tim *bolts* in the opposite direction.

Tim's built for speed in a way that Jason's body isn't. From the look on Jason's face, it's clear that he can tell Tim is holding back to make sure they aren't separated. But Tim refuses to run off and leave Jason behind.

They round a corner and there's suddenly another approaching wall of security guards. These have absolutely nothing against lethal force. Tim comes to a jolting halt, skidding a little on the tiled floor. Jason is at his back, but they both know they can't fight their way out of this like they normally would.

The ground beneath their feet shakes ever so slightly, but the chances of an earthquake *now*, in this season, are abysmally low. Have they shot another one of those grenades? Surely not at their own facility.

"We surrender!" Jason yells in Darmanian. "Don't shoot!"

Had Tim not been in this game as long as he has, he would've immediately spun on his heel and shot Jason a *look*. But as it is, he understands; there's no way they can fight out of this, not without bringing way too much unwanted attention onto themselves and onto the other base that Bruce and his team are hitting.

They have the information, though. Tim clings to that, even as he wishes that he'd placed the USB stick somewhere a little harder to find.

A gap is created amongst the soldiers, and one of them walks up to Tim and Jason.

"Come with me," he says, absolutely no inflection to his rigid Darmanian words. "Try anything, and my people will shoot to kill."

Tim gulps as loudly as he can, widening his eyes and nodding his jerkily. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Jason mirroring him. Maybe *this* is why Bruce and Alfred had encouraged Jason's Shakespeare habits so much. It isn't easy to make someone with the bulk that Jason has cower, but Tim has to admit that Jason's acting is convincing.

They're handcuffed and led down the hallway. The blinking red lights of the panic alarm are still going off. As they pass another window, Tim can see a stream of what appears to be employees exiting the building. They go along one of the dirt tracks, disappearing somewhere into the woods.

Tim doesn't know whether that's a good sign. He doesn't look at Jason, because Jason is steadily not looking at him.

They pass through another three doors – each unlabelled – and Tim tries to follow along as best as he can with the map that he'd memorised. They're somewhere in the east of the compound right now; that's the area with the big labs – or so they'd assumed, based on the chemical showers that had been indicated on the blueprints.

This place is clearly for research and production, though. He doesn't know whether the majority of the staff here even know what their work is going towards, especially in a facility like this where there are posters on walls with smiling employees and a campy message about an inclusive workplace.

Now there are more doors labelled with Darmanian writing. Tim can somewhat read them, but it's clear to anyone in possession of even half a braincell that it says 'KEEP OUT'.

Finally, they're shoved into an interrogation room. Two of the guards come up to them and pat them down. They didn't come here with the intention of getting into a fight, but they have their typical equipment on their persons, and didn't put much of an effort into hiding anything.

Tim watches the piles of guns and knives grow, and the frown on the head soldier's face get deeper.

"Who are you?" It's not even a question, really, more of a reaction to the amount of weaponry they have.

"Look, man," Tim says. "Some kids dared us to break in here and carve our names into the walls and steal a bunch o' shit for proof. We're here on a *vacation*."

"Really."

Tim's shoved into a chair, hands cuffed behind him. They clearly don't think much of him and Jason, because they haven't even attached the cuffs to the chair. The bright white light glares into Tim's eyes as he stares up at the man.

And then someone punches Jason in the stomach.

"*Hey!"* Tim protests, jerking forward in his chair. "We promised we'd cooperate!"

“You can *cooperate*,” the air rushes out of Tim’s lungs as he’s now delivered a blow to the gut, “by telling us what you know about Dherain.”

“Dherain?” Jason wheezes. “Look, dude, we’re *uni kids*. We’re just here backpacking through with a few of our friends. All we know about Dherain is that it’s somewhere north of here.”

“For every answer you are unable to provide, you will be punished.”

Tim breathes through the flurry of blows that rain down on him. The good thing is, these guys don’t think they know anything. Darmania is *just* dodgy enough that it isn't too uncommon to be carrying around so many knives. The bad part is, there’s no way they’re letting him and Jason out of here alive.

That’s when the door of the room is kicked open, and Cass leaps inside.

She’s accompanied by Bruce.

“Oh hey, look, those are the friends that dared us,” Jason says.

In the time it takes for the three men in the room with them to wrap their minds around this new development, Cass and Bruce have knocked them out.

“We got your distress signal,” Bruce says, coming over to Tim to free him as Cass goes to Jason.

“Distress signal?” Tim says with a glare towards Jason. “We were *fine.*”

Jason doesn’t say anything to Tim, just clenches his jaw. “Are N and Robin here, too?” he asks, rising with a wince.

They’ve both got bruised ribs, for sure.

Cass nods. “They’re outside.”

“The entire compound is empty,” Bruce says to them as they cautiously head outside. It’s a question as much as it is information.

Tim nods. “Yeah, we accidentally set off a panic alarm and they all evacuated.”

Bruce noticeably refrains from responding to that. Maybe he’s just waiting until they’re out of here, Tim thinks. It’s hard to ream someone out about a mission when you’re still in enemy territory.

“We need to go back to the main server room,” Jason says. “We can’t have all this on their databases. They’ll know it’s us.”

Cass nods. “I’ll go with you.”

Jason looks at Bruce and Tim. “Evacuate anyone else and get yourselves out. We’ll be out in seven.”

Bruce looks like he's about to protest. "Don't do anything stupid," he warns them as they near the intersecting hallway. "Seven minutes. Comms on."

Running with bruised ribs isn't as bad as running with *broken* ribs, but it's still no picnic. Jason raced down the endless passages and doorways, Cass trailing only half a step behind him. Bruce had been right: this place is eerily empty now. Wherever Dick and Damian were, they were doing a good job at keeping the remaining occupants busy.

Jason skids to a halt in front of the server room, racing to the one side of the room. He ignores the waves of déjà vu he's getting at being here with Cass, making another decision to make that'll change things for them, for better or worse.

"What're you thinking?" Cass asks. Her words are non-judgemental, genuinely wanting to know. She isn't assuming anything; or at least, she isn't letting on to Jason that she's made assumptions.

"This place is chock full of drugs that they're dealing," Jason says distractedly, typing away. "Cass. C'mon. You know what I'm thinking."

"How," Cass says this time, stepping forward so she stands next to him. And then she sees the series of keys he's pressed.

Jason had honestly discovered it by accident when he'd been impatiently waiting for Tim to be done. But now he's relieved, because this is the fastest, most efficient way of taking care of all their current problems in one fell swoop.

The employee had held down the panic button, but not before showing Jason the other options that had flared up in the millisecond before the alarms had started blaring.

Jason glances at his watch. "We have two minutes left," he says.

Cass changes the channel on her comms unit. "Status?" she says. After a moment, she relays to Jason, "Everyone's evacuated."

"Tim has the data," Jason says, mostly for his own benefit. And then he presses the button.

Immediately, a countdown of thirty seconds shows up on every monitor in the room. Jason watches, almost transfixed, as it goes down.

Cass yanks him by the sleeve. "Come *on*," she says forcibly.

It's easier to run through the building now that it's completely empty. Cass is faster than Jason, and there's no way in hell that Jason's going to be the reason she gets blown up with him, so he pushes himself to the absolute maximum he can.

Even then, they just barely make it the barbed fence before the entire compound explodes. The two of them hit the ground immediately, arms over their heads. That's not enough to stop Jason's ears from ringing as he pants against the dirt, elbows digging into the ground to have space to breathe.

He spares a glance to the side to make sure Cass is alright, and sees her looking right back as she says something over the comms. Jason tries for a smile, and all he receives is an exasperated look in return, making his smile wider.

This is the second building they've blown up together. As far as bonding goes, it's not bad.

When there's finally silence, Jason shakily rises to his hands and knees, waiting until the headrush is under control before making it the rest of the way. Cass is holding onto the fence and breathing methodically; when she sees him standing, she grabs onto the fence and starts climbing.

"Thanks," Jason says. He knows he says it almost as a shout, but Cass' ears are probably just as bad as his are. "How'd your side of things go, by the way?"

His voice is slightly winded as he tries to take in shallow breaths of air. Climbing the fence with his ribs is *definitely* not fun.

"He got home and fell asleep. *Really* asleep. So I drove his truck back to where we parked the plane. We can go over everything when we get back."

Jason lets out a relieved breath. "Glad we have one win, at least."

Cass shoots him a look. "You turned off the security protocol before blowing it up," she says. "They won't know what happened. Tim has the data."

"Yeah but, when have things ever gone *that* right for us? And for this to be hit after whatever the others did to the Dhernian one? They'll definitely connect them."

Cass is quiet. Then she signs something, almost too fast for Jason to read. *We took one of their research labs off the grid. That has to count for something.*

Jason sighs. "Yeah, Cassie. It does." But it doesn't feel like it. Nothing about this case feels *enough*, not after what happened – is *still* happening – to Dick.

The rest of the team are waiting at the Batplane. Beside it, there's the second Batplane and also the truck that Cass stole. The moment they're within sight, the door to their plane opens and out comes Tim.

"You guys blew up *another* building?" is the first thing he says, eyes scanning them from head to toe.

“Yup,” Cass responds. “We need an exploding backdrop to walk away from.”

Tim pouts slightly. “I want a cool exploding backdrop to walk away from, too.” He looks at Jason, but Jason doesn’t make eye contact.

Instead, he walks onto the plane; he’s thirsty as hell. Jason rummages through the supplies and fishes out a water bottle, downing half the contents in a single go.

And then he notices that the ship is entirely empty. “Hey,” he calls, sticking his head out. “Where’d the others go?” Normally, they pile onto one plane to debrief.

And that’s when Tim looks uncomfortable. “Dick had… a migraine, we think. They’re in the other plane. It had more space.”

“You *think* it’s a migraine?*”*

A million thoughts about serum side effects go through Jason's brain, and he's out of the plane in a flash, before he can even register his movements. He's about to enter the other plane when he realises that loud noise and bright light might not be the best for someone with a migraine.

The door opens automatically for him. Jason enters immediately, and he can hear the soft footsteps of the others as they step inside behind him. It's going to be a little cramped; the maximum capacity for these planes is four people – and even then, the fourth person either has to be a child or someone with the physique of Tim.

But the plane is empty except for Dick. He's propped up against the wall, sitting upright on one of the cots. His forehead’s crinkled up slightly, the only indication of any pain.

The alarming part are the bright red tear tracks down his face.

“Is that *blood?”* Jason asks.

Dick’s eyes open into slits. “Oh hey,” he says tightly. “You guys made it. B was about to have an aneurysm.”

“You’re the one who looks like he’s had the aneurysm,” Tim says, stepping closer with a look of clear horror on his face. “Was that from the explosion?”

“And where’re B and Damian?” Jason adds. In a space this big, it’s impossible to hide. There’s only one bathroom onboard.

“Was what from the explosion?” Dick asks. He opens his eyes a little bit wider, and Jason winces at how red they are. “The others went to check out the truck Cass stole.”

Cass huffs. “I didn’t *steal* it,” she says. “Technically, it wasn’t his.”

Jason, in the meantime, has gone to the bathroom to wet a towel. He can’t handle seeing the blood as it run down Dick’s face.

“Here,” he says now, handing it to Dick.

Dick stares at it with an amused look, and then rubs his eyes with it. It’s only when he draws it back that he does a double take. “Holy shit,” he says, fingers going to his face and coming back red.

“Yeah, you look really freaky,” Tim tells him, a frown on his face.

“So this is a new development?” Jason demands more than asks.

Dick shrugs. “Apparently I got knocked out during a fight. They dragged me a little bit before I woke up with a killer headache. But this… yeah, it’s new.”

Jason glances at Cass. No, luck is definitely not on their side.

It’s four hours later that Jason slumps back into his seat on the Batplane and closes his eyes. They’d run the tests that they could on Dick with the limited supplies they had here, concluding that he didn’t seem to be dying, at least.

Bruce, Dick, and Damian had gone back to Gotham, leaving Jason, Tim, and Cass to go find the rest of the delivery men and stop the drugs from hitting the streets. Jason can hear Tim tapping away rapidly on the laptop he brought along, can hear the huffs of breath as Cass sleeps. He knows that he and Tim should be asleep, too, if they’re going to be functioning tomorrow.

They had gone through the contents of the truck, but it was much more of the same. Crates of drugs to be delivered to suppliers and then sold on the streets, names of particular clients who were chosen to receive Aqua specified with each batch.

“Why’re you mad at me?” Tim says absentmindedly, gaze still on the screen in front of him. “Because I went off the plan?”

Jason’s mouth twists. “I’m not *mad* at you,” he begins.

Tim shoots him a withering look. “Sure you’re not,” he says, and doesn’t elaborate.

“Look,” Jason says. “There’s a fucking reason we were supposed to be here doing *recon*. We weren’t supposed to leave *nearly* as much of a mark as we have. These are people getting turned into *kids* and then *sold*. Because the buyers have a fucking *age* requirement and these sick fucks found a creative way of always having exactly what they want on tap. You going rushing in just because you *felt* like it was a dumb move and it nearly sent this whole thing undercover. Our deal was that we'd rescue *hostages*.”

Tim looks at him intently. “That’s it?” he says.

Jason bristles. “What, that’s not bad enough?”

Tim shrugs. “Well, no, you’re right. But I had a hunch and…” He chews his lip. “Look, I know what I did could’ve ended badly—”

“No, you *don’t* get it.” Jason sits upright. “Last time it was *Dick* who had the harebrained idea and went undercover in *my* place because he thought I wasn’t well enough for it, and look where that got him. He was—” Jason clamps his mouth shut and stares down at his hands, willing the green in his vision to die down.

“He was what, Jay?” Tim asks softly. When Jason doesn’t say anything, he presses on. “You guys have kept something to yourself this whole time. We deserve to know.”

Cass stirs from the bunk. Jason hadn’t noticed her breathing patterns change; had she been asleep at all?

“He was dead,” she says. “Or close enough that there was nothing we could’ve done. He had no heartbeat when we found him.”

Tim gapes at her. “*What?* But you said—”

“They’d given him only like half the serum when we arrived. On top of physical torture. He was *covered* in blood. We couldn’t even tell where the injuries *were*,” Jason says emotionlessly.

Jason can picture it as vividly as though he was there all over again, standing beside Dick’s still body. He’d been strapped to a table, his costume ripped into scraps. There had been five syringes beside him; one had been injected into his arm just as Jason and Cass had burst in.

“One of the scientists there said he’d live if we finished the dose,” Cass says.

Jason’s head jerks up at her at the use of 'we'. She looks back at him steadily.

“Wait,” Tim says. “Wait. So *you* guys are responsible for the regression?”

“It was that or let him *die*,” Cass says fiercely. “What would you have done?”

Tim replies after a long pause. “The same.”

His face shows guilt, but his words are steady. And Jason understands. He just hopes that this second chance that Dick's getting at life isn't anything like his own.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a shorter chapter than usual, but next time we'll get a juicy conversation to make up for it ^~^

Darmania and Dherain are both fictional countries that DC made up, by the way. Nothing I've used in here about them has any basis in canon (except maybe the continent they're both from?)

More =/ news about chapter updates: so I'm gonna try doing Whumptober this year, and do my best to write as many fics as I can before October actually hits, so I lowkey have no idea how soon the next chapter might come out. I wrote like three and a half fics this week so they're definitely going faster than the process of writing this chapter was lol

Anyway, thank you for reading!!! I hope you enjoyed this chapter!!

Chapter 8: VIII

Chapter Notes

raise your hand if you also thought that this would forever stay a WIP

this chapter would still be a vague daydream if it hadn't been for aurora, gem, writergeek, and marzue helping drag me out of writer's block and untangling the plot <3<3<3

so after rereading this whole fic twice and creating a summary table for it (here's the reader version in case you, like me, have no memory of anything in this story), here is the next chapter ^~^

Warnings: a fair amount of blood :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bleeding refuses to stop entirely. They're still about an hour away from Gotham and Dick has been steadily leaking blood from various parts of his body the entire time. It hadn't started off so bad – a few trickles from his eyes that had itched as they made their way down his face. About halfway there, he'd felt a tickling sensation on his neck, and drawing back his hand from it, realised that there were tendrils of red running down from his ears. There's still a faint ringing in his ear, too, a sound that'd been following him since about halfway through their mission to bail out Tim and Jason.

Dick had staunched the flow from his nose with a towel; he would have to change it again in a little while because of how drenched it's become. He wishes that the aircraft they were in wasn't so tiny – he can see the looks that Damian is giving him, that barely hidden fear, and he hates it.

But at least the pills have stopped his migraine.

Despite the plane having autopilot, Bruce is still piloting. From where Dick is seated, slumped, he can see Bruce's two-handed, white-knuckled grip on the wheel. He had taken off the cowl a few minutes into take-off, but the rest of the suit remains. It's difficult to spot the lines of tension that marked his body when he has on Batman's thick armour, but after so many years, Dick can see it in the way Bruce holds his shoulders.

"Hey, Damian?" he says, voice coming out strange with his clogged nose. "Could you tell Bruce that crashing us out of exhaustion from holding your body still like that isn't going to get us to the Cave any faster?"

Damian huffs a breath, brow furrowing even more. Dick would sighed, but he's afraid of undoing whatever progress his nose has made with clotting the blood.

And then Damian gets up and walks over to Bruce. He's tall enough that he has to stoop slightly, though that isn't saying much – even Dick has to stoop there. "Father," he says. "Turn on auto-pilot."

Bruce looks up at him. Dick sees that glaze that had formed over his eyes disappear, and Bruce blinks a little before pressing a series of buttons. There's no noticeable change in the plane's speed or trajectory, just Bruce now leaving the console and following Damian to where the seats are.

"Stretch a little, B," Dick suggests, shifting the towel against his nose slightly. He refuses to wince as he presses a wet spot against his face. "Or you'll be grouchy in the morning."

They can probably tell what he's trying to do. This is probably the most amount of words Dick has said ever since he'd been dumped – from his perspective, anyway – into this strange future. But Dick can't help it – it's a habit long ingrained within himself to shift the focus away whenever it landed on something that he doesn't want others to see.

Now, that focus is on him and the blood pouring out of his body. He hates it, hates the concern in Damian and Bruce's expressions, the way their faces pale as they look at him, as though their bodies are trying to make up for the blood that Dick's is losing so steadily.

"It's gotten worse?" Bruce says, though the question is rather redundant. There's a gross pile of bloody towels beside Dick, on the floor because he much prefers mopping the blood than scrubbing the seats.

It's fascinating, Dick thinks distractedly, how genes worked. Bruce and Damian wear their frowns the same way.

"Not really," Dick says lightly. "Blood's still coming out, just through more taps."

Damian glares at him. "You've lost brain cells as well as blood."

Dick can't really argue with that, but he tries to stifle the laugh that threatens to emerge.

"Try tilting your head back," Bruce says, placing a hand over Dick's on the towel and removing it.

Dick complies, his copper-stained hand hovering now that it no longer has a job. And then he gags as blood fills his mouth faster than he can swallow, choking on the taste as he furiously shoves down the need to throw up. It's absolutely everywhere, that sickly sweet tang, spilling over his mouth and down his chin.

Bruce's hands work quickly, one going behind Dick's head to bring it forward so the blood dribbles out of his mouth and nose instead of going down his throat. Damian finds a vomit bag somewhere, shoving it under Dick's face to catch the blood.

Dick lets himself gag and choke now, knowing he isn't going to make a mess on the floor of the Batplane. It probably feels like there's more coming out of him than there actually is, because the bag is barely even half-full by the time Dick gets out most of it.

That's when he registered a moist cloth running over his ears, probably cleaning up the dried trails of blood that had leaked out of him. He lifts a shaky hand up to take it himself, but it's quickly grabbed by familiar hands in a gentle grasp before the cloth is used to wipe off the blood from his fingers. Dick hadn't even realised he'd gotten so much of it on himself until now.

It's strange, this sensation of essentially being *babied*. The last week or so in his time, Dick had felt orphaned yet again, a pontoon out at sea. For once, it hadn't been through Bruce's doing, but entirely because of his own actions. Despite all that had happened since then, all of Bruce's unexpected words and placations, it still didn't seem to have truly sunk in.

Instead of being taken to the future, it almost feels like he's been transported to the past, where he's once again a child who has to prove himself. Is he being stubborn now, when he'd had to stifle down that craving for a shoulder to lean on only a few short days ago? For so many years, he's considered himself to be different from Batman because he knows when to ask for help, but surely recent events have proven him wrong.

All this thinking over someone cleaning the blood off of you, he can hear Roy saying in his ear. *Just go in for a damn hug or something*. It's different, Dick had always wanted to say, though he knows that Roy's problems with Ollie had been nothing to scoff at, before. He remembers dropping Roy off at one point after a mission, back when they had still been teenagers. He remembers the way Oliver's face had transformed, that massive grin opening it up in a way that Dick had never seen before, had never really had cause to see. And he remembers the way the older man had yanked Roy into an embrace that had lifted Roy clean off his feet, how a cavern had opened up inside of him at the sight, though he'd outwardly laughed at the teenaged embarrassment on Roy's face.

All this thinking over a damp – and now bloody – cloth. Dick watches as Bruce thoroughly goes over his nails and in between his fingers before holding it by his ear again.

"Think I'll need a blood bag soon?" Dick wonders aloud.

He expects a grunt in return, but he doesn't get even that. Bruce gives Damian a look, and he replaces Bruce's spot by Dick, holding the cloth, as Bruce sits himself in the pilot's chair once more, rechecking their route meticulously once again. Dick has seen him do it five times in the past hour alone.

Dick sighs. "Here, Damian," he says. "Sit and nap with me. If I lean my head against the wall here, you can stuff that in there and it'll catch all the blood."

He hopes the light-headedness will go away soon, though he knows it won't, not unless he can stop all this blood from trickling out.

“If I ever run a company,” Tim comments, “I’ll make it easy for people to figure out when the fuck the illegal drugs are being rolled out.”

Jason snorts. “No you won’t. If you went evil and decided to run a drug empire, you’d bury your shit so deep that… that I don’t even know what.”

“You saying I’d make a good criminal?”

“You fishing for compliments? Quit slacking off.”

Tim sees the lid of the water bottle fly to the side of Jason’s face only a second before something hits his own cheek. He lets out a high-pitched yelp, hand automatically swinging towards Cass. She easily dodges the blow that Tim had made mostly with his eyes closed, but not before poking her fingers into the soft flesh of his side.

“What was that for?” Jason grumbles.

“I was bored,” Cass says. “You were distracting me.”

“We were distracting you from boredom?” Jason frowns at her. “But both of you kids: *focus*. We don’t know how much time we have.”

Tim doesn’t think he’s ever heard anyone – other than Babs – call Cass *kid*, but she doesn’t bristle like Tim might’ve, at one point. Instead, she gives Jason the stink eye and blows out a long, loud breath, making her fringe fly up, and then resumes reading.

There *has* to be something in the piles and piles of documents that they’d salvaged. Actually, no, Tim corrects himself. There *is* something in them; they just don’t have the time to go through all of data to find out *where*.

He has an algorithm parsing through everything on their USB drives, though it’s slow going. The three of them are sprawled on the floor of the Batplane, boxes upon boxes of papers – most of them useless – strewn all around. Tim hopes that the others have stuck to his system, because he hates theirs, and isn’t shy in telling them so.

“Here’s another list of addresses.” Jason passes a sheet of paper to Tim.

They’ve found about ten of these so far. None of them came with names, only ID numbers for customers. Like, as Jason had put it, being enrolled in drug school without even knowing it.

Tim dutifully takes the page and places it on the seat behind him, where the rest of them are. The document he himself is currently looking at is a worksheet of various numbers and sums. Tim knows it’s probably important, but right now, it has nothing to do with their mission.

“More numbers,” Cass says, handing him a thick stack of papers, most of them stapled together.

Tim grimaces at how big the ‘numbers we think will come in handy’ pile is now getting, but puts it there anyway.

“At this rate the damn ship won’t fly,” Jason grumbles.

“If it can carry your angst-ridden ass, then a few boxes of nefarious plot shouldn’t be too bad,” Tim mutters.

“Yeesh,” Jason says, staring at him while Cass subtly sticks her hand out for a high-five, which Tim eagerly reciprocates. “When did *you* get sassy?”

The pinging from the computer sends them all hurtling to their feet, ready to be done with tedious work and finally hit the streets. Somehow, Cass is already sitting in the chair and scrolling through the highlighted sections when Tim and Jason get there, chewing on a blade of hair as slouches forward.

“Anything?” Tim says. He’s going to rip his hair out if the six hours that this had taken had amounts to nothing. That, and go grovel to Barbara to take a look at his program.

Cass hums a little. “This,” she says finally.

Yet another list of addresses, though these are coordinates. Tim squints at them, trying to find the thing that will connect this all to the dealers, instead of the customers.

“Can we get this plotted on a map?” Jason asks. “I think I see it.”

Tim leans over Cass to type out a few commands, waiting while the computer reluctantly whirs to life and displays a map of Dherain’s capital city. Eleven little flags plot out the locations.

“What’re we thinking?” Tim says distractedly. “Territories? The city’s sectioned off.”

Cass grabs a stylus and drew five lines through the map. “These are the gang territories,” she explained. “Coordinates don’t… follow them.”

She’s right. Tim has never seen an operation that had flaunted their power quite in this way, unless it had been for the express purpose of gaining more land. Did The Company have some sort of agreement with the gangs, perhaps? Or were they operating under the radar?

A plan is beginning to form in Tim’s mind, though he can already see the hundreds of ways it can go wrong if this one assumption he’s making is wrong. It’ll work, though, if he’s right. Not only that, but it’ll weed out The Company from here for a long time, and basically ensure that they won’t be able to find a foothold in quite the same way again. Though, blowing up their base of operations had certainly gone a long way to accomplish that as well.

Bruce had given them the task of stopping the deliveries of the drugs meant to take place at some point this week. He’d been assuming that, because they’d blown up the main operating building, there would be no future here for any of The Company’s endeavours. Tim’s still following Bruce’s orders, just a little more meticulously than Bruce had probably intended.

Bruce had long since altered designs that required a need for mirrors to see other aircrafts, and had replaced them with cameras, largely because of the cloaking device he'd also implemented. But he'd kept in the internal mirror, for a few reasons. For one thing, it felt less creepy than constantly viewing the cameras that were scattered throughout the interior; and for another, it gave Bruce a sense of comfort to be able to look in it and see the passengers with a single glance. There were enough screens as it was, anyway.

Dick had fallen asleep at some point on the flight home, and would only rouse dazedly when Damian shakes his shoulder from time to time. When Bruce looks back at the two of them, Damian sitting stoic and still with two fingers clasped around Dick's wrist, and Dick slumped against the seat with a bloody towel wrapped around the back of his neck and head lolling this way and that with the sway of the aircraft, he feels what others may describe as a stomach-ache.

Bruce knows better. He's been dealing with these 'stomach-aches' for what feels like his whole life, at this point. Really, it's *worse* when he feels at ease and the tension creeps away, because he can't fathom what it's like to not be in a constant state of worry over some detail or other, and thus, the stomach-ache makes a vengeful return.

He hasn't gotten rid of the blood that's now splattered across his own clothing. Dick's blood. He'd put Dick in this position, threefold – right now, coming along on this mission though he'd known that Dick shouldn't be doing anything strenuous when they didn't know what the serum would do to him; in a position that he'd needed to be given that serum at all, when it'd been Bruce's plan to have Jason going in undercover, and he'd never altered the plan in any way when Jason hadn't been able to do it; and lastly, of course, is that Bruce will always blame himself for Dick going to Bludhaven in the first place. It wasn't an illogical jump for his mind to make – *he'd* been the one to send Dick there, and now, after all these months of talking it through with Sarah, he realises that it'd been his fault that Dick had decided to stay there, had felt that he'd needed to prove himself.

Dick would argue, he knows. He'd talk about things like *choices* and *independence* and *I'm an adult now, Bruce* and *you can't blame yourself for shit I decide to do*. He wouldn't be wrong, but Bruce had still been the one to send him to Bludhaven. He'd still been the one to agree to sending in Dick to infiltrate The Company.

They're a minute away from landing now. It's night-time in Gotham, which is lucky, because otherwise they would've had to rely on their camouflage technology – which is still mostly in beta mode – and the fog around the Manor, which is reliable in the sense that it liked to come out right when Bruce *didn't* need it.

"Ready for landing," Bruce says over the intercom.

The voice that echoes throughout the aircraft is Batman's, and it's as though it's a message from him to Bruce, telling him to snap out of this funk. It's just a little blood; he'd seen much, *much* worse – why is he getting so worked up about it?

Spoiler will be out patrolling with Huntress and Black Canary tonight, so Alfred will be the only one to greet them when they arrived. He's already contacted the Batcomputer to let the Cave know that they're coming, and to ready the medbay as well as blood bags.

Bruce turns to manual control when they land. The Batplane slides through the runway and entrance as smoothly as ever, but he winces inwardly at every jerk and bump, not knowing what Dick's condition is right now. He's babying him, he knows. Seeing a teenaged version of his eldest, his most capable, most trusted, is what had been the catalyst, and now he had no idea quite how to turn it *off* again.

"Damian," Bruce barks the moment they come to a standstill. "Get Alfred and fill him in. I want you getting the Batcomputer started on the bloodwork."

Damian only nods sharply, flitting out of the plane before Bruce has barely finished speaking. Instead of waiting for Alfred to enter the craft, he goes over to Dick, who had stood up when they'd landed and had been swaying a little as he tries to get his mind focused. Bruce slides a shoulder under Dick's, hand going to grasp at the belt loop on Dick's other side, and they make their way to the medbay.

"How do you feel?" he asks. Batman's working away in the back of his head, berating him for taking so much time and care over one individual, but Bruce has gotten increasingly better at ignoring him in the last year or so.

Dick lets out a light, breathy laugh. "Peachy," he says, and they both ignore the flecks of blood that follow his laugh. "Light-headed, mostly, but that's probably to be expected. Migraine's still gone, but the ringing's still here."

Bruce doesn't say anything in response, but he squeezes Dick's hand that he's holding in place over his shoulder with all the tightness that's now claiming his stomach.

Alfred's ready by the medbay, hanging up a blood bag and readying an IV drip. Damian's seating at his work station, so Bruce knows that he's informed Alfred, but that doesn't stop the older man's face blanching at the sight of Dick's so very bloody one.

"Goodness," is all he said, before he becomes all business.

Bruce has tried for so many years to channel that numbness, that wall of glass, whenever the situation demands for it, but he's never been able to achieve it quite the way that Alfred does. Batman hates to leave, but Alfred is always glad to shed that skill that he's developed over the course of his many occupations. And the war. Of course, the war.

"It really isn't as bad as it looks, Alfie," Dick says with a grin. His words would probably be more reassuring had his teeth not been coated in red.

"That's always the case with you youngsters, isn't it?" Alfred says, taking it all in stride.

“Dick, I’m going to need a sample of your blood—”

Dick doesn’t snort a laugh – he knows better than that, now – but his lips are upturned (though his eyes are glassy with blood loss) when he tilts his head towards Bruce. Droplets of blood still fall from his ear, though not with the same constancy they had when Bruce had first stemmed it.

With a grimace, Bruce holds a vial under Dick’s ear, watching as it fills up. When there’s enough for him to use, he gently pushes Dick’s head back up and presses a little bit of gauze under it.

“Listen to Alfred,” he says as he walked over to Damian. To Damian, he says, “Did you find anything?”

Damian’s chewing on his lip. “There… of the three main samples we logged of Richard, it shows a physical erosion, but it wasn’t very obvious until now.”

There are three samples of Dick’s blood based around this whole regression: they’d taken a sample the first time they’d brought him back and he’d been regressed to his seventeen-year-old self, once before they’d administered what they had thought would be the antidote, and then once after it’d taken effect and Dick had been aged up by only a few years.

Bruce knows what Damian means. They should’ve spotted this sooner, *much* sooner. Tim and Bruce have been looking at the samples individually – not all together – which is their first mistake. The second is to only look at what they did wrong with regards to the antidote. This game that isn’t a game has no room for mistakes like this, Bruce knows. His gut takes it as invitation for another painful clench.

“So it’s as a result of the original drug they gave him?” Damian nods. Batman doesn’t hesitate before asking the next question. “Did the antidote we make seem to have quickened the negative symptoms?”

Damian looks at him, and that’s all the answer that Bruce needs. He runs a hand over his face, before regaining composure.

“Damian,” he says. “Go wash up, shower. You have school in the morning. I’ll handle this. And I *promise*,” he adds, when Damian opens his mouth to argue, “I’ll call you if I need anything or if anything with Dick goes south, okay?”

You’re their father; you’re there to reassure them. What did your parents do when they tried to reassure you? Bruce’s answer to that had been conflicted. His mother he remembers for her soft touches, a cradled cheek, a kiss atop his hair. His father… he’d ridden on his father’s shoulders a couple times, learnt how to shake hands ‘like a *real* man’, and had had his hair ruffled at least once a day. Reassurance had come in the form of a presence, a scent. He’d realised that when it had slipped away and been tentatively replaced by the sound of knives chopping vegetables in the kitchen and the stench of industry level antiseptic.

That answer had gotten him a thoughtful sound from Sarah, and a stack of books to read.

Bruce leans over, cupping the back of Damian's head. He doesn't kiss the top of Damian's head so much as presses his lips to the flop of curly hair, resting his face there for as long as Batman will allow him before he lets his youngest go. Damian still hasn't gotten used to such blatant depictions of affection from him, and he doesn't say a word as he makes his way up the stairs, though Bruce catches him glancing back to both himself and Dick on the brightly lit cot.

It takes about fifteen minutes of analysing and searching through bloodwork that they have on the other age regressed kids for Bruce to come to some conclusions. Jason had been meticulous in samples from the people who'd consented to giving them. The Cave's system hadn't found any differences when the samples had been filed and analysed, but this time Bruce had ran tests with all of them against Dick's bloodwork. They'd compared all of them together before, never having any real reason to do so against Dick's individually.

The strains of the serum are the same, but there's one single difference to Dick's. It has an expiry date on it. Dick hadn't been de-aged to sell – it had been a means to an end, a way to get rid of an enemy.

Bruce swallows down the increasing tension building inside of him at this newfound knowledge and tried to look at it objectively, scientifically. Dick hadn't been showing any of the symptoms he currently is when he'd originally been de-aged. From that, Bruce can make the logical leap that there's something missing that Dick either hadn't been exposed to, or hadn't experienced through his brain chemicals.

The most obvious suspect would be the two giant bases they had just traipsed through, but Dick had been wearing a mask with filters on it the entire time. There's nothing that could've gotten through it that he hadn't been breathing in this whole time, or even at the base where he'd been captured.

That leads Bruce to believe that there's something about the age that Dick currently is that's a factor in this equation. He's much closer to his original age now than he'd been the previous time. Perhaps it's a matter of time, literally – the older he is, the quicker the symptoms will hit.

Bruce glances over to the cot, where Dick's shifting around in his sleep. He'd dozed off at some point, and Bruce has been keeping an eye on his vitals ever since, worried that he'll experience some symptom while he's still unconscious.

He walks over to the medbay now, hoping it's just restlessness, and not nightmares. Dick isn't a quiet sleeper unless he had to be, hence the strap securing the arm that had the IV lines and blood in it.

Dick's muttering something when Bruce gets near enough to hear, but he isn't making a sound. His lips are moving to form words, but they're silent exhales of air. His hands are open, fingers outstretched. That's the thing that makes Bruce frown – Dick's nightmares usually result in clenched fists, a fighting position.

"Dick," Bruce said. "Dick, wake up."

There are suspicions that Bruce has, about Dick's time in Bludhaven, about the things he'd glossed over in his reports or outright omitted. But now isn't the time. He'll fix things, fix whatever is wrong with Dick's body right now, and then he'll… figure out a way to have a conversation. Or at least, he'll figure out how to make Dick comfortable enough with Bruce for him to broach the subject on his own.

Dick wakes with a jolt, instantly feeling the band around his arm holding it down and the other one coming up with a fist.

"Hey, calm down. You're in the Cave. We had to give you a blood transplant and Alfred put you on an IV drip. You're alright."

Dick blinks a few times before his gaze falls on Bruce, and really *sees* him. He brings the heel of his palm up to rub at his eyes, not seeing the way Bruce grimaces from seeing it digging into his eyeball.

"Didn't mean to fall asleep," he says, voice thick with sleep.

"You need the rest," Bruce says.

He hands him a glass of water, and Dick takes small sips.

"I have a theory," Bruce starts off by saying, eyes working their way over Dick and frowning at the paleness in his features.

"Yeah?" Dick looks up, more hopeful than Bruce wishes he'd be.

He's spent the entire time he'd trained Dick to instill in him that sense of unconscious faith, to always obey orders the moment they were given. It had been the only way that he could guarantee – to some extent – Dick's safety out on the field. Bruce had hated growing away from that. Now, he sees why it was a necessity. All things must grow and evolve. It's fruitless to try and cling to them the way they were, or had once been. He just wishes he'd realised it earlier.

It doesn't take Bruce very long to explain to Dick what he suspects. Dick had always been quick to pick up on what Bruce is leading to.

"So you want to use the serum on me again?" he says. "To be… what, a little kid?"

Bruce hesitates. "That would be safest," he says. "You'd still have all the memories that you currently have, so there would be no danger of you—"

"Immediately screaming 'stranger danger' and running to the near police station?" Dick's mouth is upturned as he looks at Bruce, then back at the ground. "Did you come to ask for my permission, or to talk you out of it?"

Bruce blinks. In all honesty, he isn't entirely sure. It's been so long that he's been working with a team that he doesn't know what he would've done before. Now, when Tim is home – which is still most of the time – Bruce will go to him with evidence such as this. And when Tim isn't around, Alfred.

“From what I can tell, you’ve already convinced yourself,” Dick continues, “meaning the evidence is clearly there. So you aren’t here to talk yourself out of it so much as talk me into it.” There’s a *which is new* that Bruce feels ashamed of.

He nods jerkily. “Yes.”

“And this’ll give you time to figure out how to *really* fix me without me spewing blood and other gross fluids everywhere.” It’s not a question so much as a statement. Dick shrugs, and gives Bruce a tired smile. “Well, I’m down to be a kid again. So long as I don’t have to go to school or anything.”

Jason pretends to take a sip from the glass of champagne in his hand as he surveys the crowd. It hadn’t taken as much of an effort as he’d expected to get an invite into this charity event. A shaken hand here, some flaunting of his non-existent wealth there, and a subtle reference to his ties to the Red Hood, situated in Gotham City, USA, and suddenly Jason had been more popular than he’d ever been.

“Maybe I should move here,” he comments, lips barely moving as he speaks into his earpiece.

He suspects everyone here is wired in some way, so it doesn’t matter as much as it would’ve in Gotham.

“Why?” Cass says.

“Look how fucking famous I am. I need to make my act international.”

Tim snorts. “Your ‘act’? As a crime fighter or mafia boss?”

Jason sniffs. “Both. For the good of society.”

He waits for a response, and when none comes, he scans his surroundings a little more diligently. He’s being watched, by a man in the most boring outfit at this whole shindig. He’s tall, taller than Jason, and balding. When he turns to speak to the waiter, Jason spots the glint of a gold tooth in his mouth.

“The guy at the bar?”

There’s a moment’s pause, before Tim says, “Yup, that’s Tandel.”

"Well," Jason says, "here goes. No mourners, n—"

"No funerals," Cass says, finishing the saying, and Jason has to force himself to not express his surprise.

"You read fantasy?" he practically hisses. There's a high chance that the utter glee on his face will give away their whole game here.

"My friend. She showed me the show trailer." Jason's about to offer to hook her up with audiobooks when Cass speaks again, this time her words coming rapid. “Go over in five minutes, from the right. Order whatever he’s having.”

Jason had been on enough missions with Cass ever since they’d targeted The Company that he no longer blinks an eye at instructions such as this. He finds the nearest waiter and places his glass of champagne on the empty tray, feeling the need to add in a handful of notes along with it. The right and wrong people are watching, and Jason needs to make a quick impression in his hopefully short stay in this country.

And then he makes his way over to the bar, slipping onto a seat one down from Tandel. The other man gives him a scrutinising look, and Jason can tell that his gaze is lingering on Jason’s wig a little too long.

“I’ll have whatever this gentleman’s having,” Jason says in stuttering Dhernian.

There’s a pause, and then Tandel laughs, a full-belly laugh that puts Jason on edge, slapping the polished wood of the bar. “Get him water for now,” he says in accented English. “We have things we need to discuss.”

Jason raises an eyebrow. “You were expecting me?” He needs to keep up the absolute butchering of the language, but the stifled laughter in his ears at his pronunciation certainly isn’t helping.

“You weren’t exactly subtle, Mr…”

“Lewis,” Jason supplies. He smiles a thanks when the bartender brings over his sparkling water. “And you aren’t wrong. I’d like to conduct my business and return home as soon as I can.”

That gets him a *hmm* from Tandel. “As I understand, you have… goods you would like to supply?”

Jason nods once, a careless finger tracing the rim of his glass. “My organisation experiments in our own backyard, but I want to take the business to international levels. This city has a dynamic environment, and not much in the way of competition.” He holds up a hand when Tandel opens his mouth to speak. “However, now that I’m here in person, it seems that my information wasn’t entirely correct.”

Tandel frowns. “All the operations that take place in the city are by our own gangs, as I told you—”

“That’s what I was led to believe,” Jason says, finally letting a hint of impatience settle into his tone. “But there’s a new dealer, and they don’t seem to be operating by the rules I was given.”

That had been something that Cass had mentioned to him when they’d been researching. The gangs in the city had come to an agreement about a decade ago, driven to negotiation after a messy, bloody year full of territory wars that had left most members and their loved ones dead or too injured to fight. It’s what had led Tim to believe that the gangs can solve this problem for them.

Tandel’s frown darkens. Jason can see the inner war that’s waging inside the man. As a leader of the Five Rings, he can’t show his ignorance about something that’s taking place in *his* city and ask Jason for a name, but if none of his usual avenues of information had reported this to him, then he needs it.

“They go by a rather mediocre name. Probably aiming for global recognition. Like pop stars,” Jason says casually, faking another sip. He lets the liquid wet his lips, and works his throat so it looks as though he’d swallowed. There’s no way he’ll be eating or drinking anything in this establishment, not when he’s surrounded by so many unknown factors. “The Company.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason can see the glint in Tandel’s gaze as this information is digested. Though he appears to be jovial, naïve, he’s anything but. And then Tandel lets out another full-bellied laugh, the same one he’d given when Jason had first appeared beside him. It’s just as unsettling as it’d been then. “Yes, yes!” he says. “But not to worry. My people are on it. They won’t interfere, if our agreement goes ahead like we discussed?”

Jason hesitates as blatantly as he can without feeling as though he’s in a pantomime. “I don’t want to operate with this much uncertainty,” he says in a hushed voice, as though he’s confessing something. “It’s my first endeavour so far from my home base. I need certainty that this new group won’t interfere.”

“Consider it done, my friend,” Tandel says. “The Five Rings protect their own.”

A friend already, Jason thinks. The lengths people will go to for the promise of a good batch of drugs. Granted, it had helped that they’ve sent a sample over, some of the finest that the Batplane evidence compartment had to offer.

“Thank you,” Jason says formally in Dhernian. “I look forward to our future together.”

He probably isn’t imagining Tandel’s hand trying to crush his when they shake on it.

Damian had accidentally fallen asleep at his desk, and he's absolutely furious about it. He'd been meaning to finish this last set of math problems and then go downstairs and check on Richard again, but now it's six in the morning and he had evidently been sleeping for about three hours.

Someone had clearly seen him asleep slumped over, because there is a thick quilt over his back. It's handmade, the multi-coloured patches of fabric soft with use. The quilt is one that his father had used to store in that chest at the base of his bed, and is now going from room to room wherever someone was found to be napping. Personally, Damian suspects Pennyworth, because he doubts that his father even remembers that chest, except on mornings when he hits a shin or stubs a toe on it. Damian quickly – but carefully – folds it and takes it back there.

Beneath the irritability at himself, he's glad for it, because nights like this are cold, and made all the chillier with how barren the landscape around the Manor is, not to mention the size of the place. Richard had mentioned to him how he'd used to do his homework in the kitchen as a child, when Alfred had been cooking, for both the company and the warmth.

His socked feet are silent as they tread the well-worn path to the Cave entrance. Even though there's all sorts of insulation in place, particularly after the Manor had had to be reconstructed after the earthquake, Damian can feel the icy floors through the thickness of his socks, infiltrating his lungs.

He's had enough exposure to the cold that this isn't exactly uncomfortable, though Damian prefers the heat. It's been about four years or five years since he's come to Gotham, but he still has bouts of homesickness for that hot desert wind, the feel of sweat running down his skin in a way that no amount of physical exertion can compare.

Damian isn't exactly sure why he's being so quiet – his father had explicitly told him that he could make his way back downstairs once he'd made sure everything is ready for school. He won't be able to stick around here for long; he'll need to leave for school in a couple hours, and Pennyworth will likely call him for breakfast in one. But nevertheless, his footsteps are invisible as he makes his way through the empty hallways.

It's even colder in the Cave, in a damp sort of way. Damian's glad for the slippers he keeps – hidden, of course, with the amount of thieving siblings he has – at the base of the staircase leading down. The medbay is hidden from this viewpoint, but he can see Batman's tense shoulders as he stands in front of the array of monitors, staring at information too small for Damian to read from over here.

"Father?" he says as he gets closer. "Have there been any new developments?" *Did you sleep at all?* is what he wants to ask. *Or were things that bad?*

Pennyworth isn't here, so clearly the situation isn't *dire*. But that thought is only a small comfort when he sees that the cots in the medbay are empty. There's only a lump of blankets to indicate where there'd once been a patient. There's an empty blood bag on the sterile silver tray, and one that's mostly full hanging where Alfred had placed it.

Worst case scenarios are always the first to run through Damian's head. He suspects it's a result of his upbringing, not to mention the amount of darkness he sees on a regular basis. He hates the way he's constantly tense, constantly anxious, about the motley crowd that make up something of a family to him. And he hates that it seems to always be Dick who's disappearing.

"Where is Richard?"

"Uh," Bruce says, running a hand over his face. "Damian, there have been… yes, there have been developments."

Damian's heart stops in his chest for the slightest of seconds. *Inconsequential, really*, a voice deep in the recesses of his mind informs him about his body's latest symptoms of affection. The rest of him is waiting.

"Dick's fine," Bruce hastily adds. "But—"

"Who's that!"

It isn't a question so much as… well, it isn't a question. That's what Damian dimly registers as he spins around to face the child that has just emerged – or rather, *bounced* – out of the bathrooms.

"Wait, wait, wait! I know you! Uhh…" The infant's face screws up slightly, his tongue sticking out. "Damian! Right? Your name's Damian? I knew it!" He does a cartwheel, and if Damian had been an idiot and not identified him by now, this well and truly hammers realisation into his skull.

"What," he hisses to Bruce, "did you do."

Bruce has the decency to look the tiniest bit shame-faced at Damian's rage. "It was his age that was creating the symptoms," he says. "The closer he was to being the age that he was when he was first administered the drug, the faster they would come."

"So your solution is to turn him into *this?"*

"Damian, I can see you're unhappy, but this is only a temporary measure. It'll give us time to —"

"A 'temporary measure'?" He probably should be a bit calmer, think this through a little more, but all Damian can see from his vantage point is how they're getting farther and farther away from *his* Richard, and no one but him seems to be caring the least about it. First it had been Drake with that odd look on his face and a puppy-like eagerness, and now it's his father with that soft warmth he's aiming at Dick. "Is that what you'll call it when you find another excuse to leave him this age, or better yet, age him down into an actual baby? Just because you screwed up with him the first time around doesn't mean the rest of us did."

Damian doesn't wait for Bruce's response. He refuses to give in to the urge to run, and he steadfastly ignores familiar eyes staring at him, wide in childish shock, as he stalks his way

back up the stairs. The school library opens an hour before classes start; he'll get Pennyworth to drop him off there so he doesn't have to chance running into either of the figures he left behind downstairs.

"Y'know," Tim comments, "for a second there—"

"Longer than a second," Cass comments from the pilot's seat.

"—I thought they were onto you and you'd be fried skunk," Tim finishes.

Jason scowls. "'Cause of the hair?" Tim really has nothing to say about skunk-like, he thinks. Jason's pretty sure he doesn't even *own* hair conditioner.

"Hey, don't look at *me* – Damian's the first one who said it, so kill him first."

It *had* been rather close. They'd gone in with minimal research, having had only the better half of a day to gather it and lay their plans out. The drugs that they had provided as 'proof' were going to vanish in three days exactly, a chemical concoction that worked similarly to leprechaun gold. Cheap to create – or at least, cheaper than heroin, and with an effect that felt like an extreme sugar high – it had become insanely popular amongst students for a short-lived period of time.

Jason's just glad that it'd *been* there. Something in him still rankles at the thought of allowing these gangs to continue their businesses, but it'll have to wait until they can eradicate this mess they've stumbled into. From when he last glanced at her screen, Cass still has searches running to look for a potential hero in Dherain who they can pass on their information to or eventually collaborate with, but either they were very underground, or Dherain didn't have a protector.

"We'll come back," he murmurs, both in an effort to appease his own guilt and as a confirmation of sorts. "When we've sorted out our own mess. We'll come back and deal with whatever we'll have done here."

Cass nods. "Yes," is all she says, with a small frown on her face as she peers outside, eyes passing over the mountains that outskirt the city. She gets up and stretches a little, walking over to where she had left her water bottle beside Tim.

There'd been a time when Jason would've well and truly been the Mr Lewis that he'd been playing. He would've seen a relatively peaceful relationship between the five gangs and taken advantage of The Company's presence, using them as a scapegoat while infiltrating Tandel's ranks and working his way in. And he would've justified it, too, on the basis that he had a set of principles that were kinder than any of the gangs could be.

He wonders, sometimes, whether those early years after the Pit were *all* because of the green haze of madness in his veins. He wonders whether he'll ever be able to separate himself from it enough to be able to tell what his intentions then had been.

Jason's lurched out of his head when Cass' frown turns thoughtful as she glances at Tim's screen, peering over his shoulder at something he's scrawling on the tablet he has in front of him. He watches as she signs something, the wrong angle for him to read clearly, and Tim responds in kind, something vague about 'it' taking another twenty minutes.

"What," Jason says curiously.

Tim glances up. "I… When we were going through the documents. I found one with a bunch of formulas so I ran them all through a simulator on the computer and against the blood work we have of all the victims…"

His voice trailed off as he peered at something on the screen, so Cass finishes for him, "It might be an antidote."

Jason blinks. "Uh," he said. "And you're only mentioning this *now?"*

Tim shrugs a little. "It's still going through the simulation," he mutters. "Might not amount to anything."

Tim had been running through simulations for an antidote ever since they'd gotten the bloodwork, Cass explains to Jason quickly. So far, none of them had been close enough for him to find them safe, and they all know how things had gone when Dick had been given a dose of what they'd thought was a 'cure'.

Jason chews on the inside of his mouth, arms folded as he leans back against the cold walls of the Batplane. "You got additional information this time, though," he says, pushing on. "And you're working with *actual* formulas you found—"

"But we have no idea what those formulas are even—" Tim begins hotly, before Jason interrupts him.

"Which is what your sims are for. But if you find one that looks like it'll work, then don't fucking… don't keep that in, just 'cause you're worried it won't work. And if we get to the point of human testing…" Now it's his turn to trail off, because what *can* he say? Jason can't speak for the de-aged victims that were under his care, and he certainly doesn't speak for Dick. And volunteering to take the drug and have it administered to himself will be met with a series of very angry lectures. He goes a different route instead, muttering, "You're good at chem. Quit constantly second guess yourself."

Tim had been looking at him with a knowing gaze, as though he'd been able to see the exact thought process that'd been running through Jason's mind. Now, he blinks in surprise, not having expected the compliment. Hell, Jason thinks, sinking deeper into his seat and glowering, if *this* is the reaction he gets when he tries to say nice things, then either the kid needs to be complimented more, or he needs to never do it again to save himself the awkwardness.

“Look,” Tim says finally, when they’re about an hour or so away from Gotham. “I know what you’re saying. More data, more accuracy. But I can’t – I *won’t* – rush it. Not when a mistake could set all these people back like another five years or something. So until the simulations come through over ninety-five percent, I won’t bother Bruce or Babs or anyone with it.”

Jason runs his hands over his face tiredly. “I don’t even know why we’re debating right now,” he admits. “We basically said the exact same shit.”

“Brain dead-ness? It’s been a long few days.”

They lapse back into quiet at that, Jason peering out the window as they begin the descent into Gotham under the cover of night. He finally lets himself think about Dick, the condition he was before he and Bruce and Damian had left for home, and hopes they don’t find something worse when they return.

Chapter End Notes

~~did i spend more time making this look pretty than i did writing? most likely~~

i should've mentioned this before but i plucked sarah cassidy (bruce's therapist in this fic) out from the arkham knights video game, so she isn't an oc or anything (she just. has 0 backstory on the wiki page so she's entirely mine to play with lol)

thank you for reading! and thank you especially if you've been waiting for,,, 6 months? for me to continue this story <3<3<3 idk what my posting schedule will look like, but hopefully i'll be finishing the story this year

this chapter is also crossposted to tumblr

Chapter 9: IX

Chapter Notes

> shoutout and hugs to those of you who started reading this after my last update, bc your comments ~~made me feel Super guilty about leaving it there lmao~~ really motivated me to get this out <3<3<3 and as always, many warm hugs to you if you've been here from the start and are still reading this <3<3
>
> No new warnings

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's been a little while," Sarah says. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

Bruce lets out a breath, wondering where to even begin. He's never cancelled a therapy session before – that'd been one of the terms they'd all agreed on, right at the start. Cancellation was out, but you could reschedule your appointment once. Bruce doesn't know if Tim and Jason had stuck to their end of the bargain, but he had.

Sarah already knows about the whole issue with Dick. She'd been the one to help him through it when Dick had first gotten caught, when Bruce had had to reschedule their session twice. He'd come close to breaking the deal then, too.

Bruce shakes his head a little. "The situation with Dick… it keeps getting worse."

"The issue with his age regression?" Sarah prompts. "Or your memories of your past behaviour?"

Bruce runs a nail over a callous on his thumb. "Both. It'll always be both. He's a child now, again. And… it's made me think."

It's still hard to verbalise his thoughts. To say out loud exactly how it had felt to watch Dick shake and shiver as his body had writhed right before Bruce, to be helpless to do anything except go through basic seizure first aid procedures and will Dick into surviving yet another regression, because the alternative, to stay the same age, was a death sentence.

"The worst part of it is," Bruce continues, "I think he would've agreed to almost anything I asked him to do. No, I know it. He said it himself." *Did you come to ask for my permission, or to talk you out of it?*

Sarah hums. "And that… makes you think of what Jason said?"

Bruce can't look up, but he doesn't give himself the luxury of staying silent. That's a coward's move, to continue hiding from it all. "Jason was right," he murmurs. "I *have*…

countless times, done what's necessary for the greater good, for the sake of 'justice' or Gotham. I just don't… I don't understand why… or *when* my attention turned away from them. It's… easier, I think, to focus on the larger picture – threats to Gotham, threats to them – than it is to… do other things.

"And now, I'm… afraid, that this whole situation is making me turn back to old habits again, and with everything I've learned since I started coming to you, I don't want to go back to how I used to be. Not just because of me – not because of me at *all*, really – but because I can see now how it affected *them* and I *can't* hurt them again. But I don't know how to…"

He doesn't know how to describe that there's a debilitating black goo that lives in his chest, and it worms into all the little corners of his body and his brain every time even the smallest thing happens, even if it's as mundane and common as someone not answering their phone. And it's *weird* and, quite frankly, *crazy*, for him to then follow that up with the fact that Batman eases that slimy gunk inside of him, puts it behind a wall and forces him to function and actually be useful.

"What old habits?" Sarah asks.

Bruce looks down at his hands. "Jason once called me a dictator, and he… wasn't exactly *wrong*." He's gotten better at this, over the year or so he's been to therapy. But then again, it's always been easy to criticise himself and strive for betterment; this is just another shortcoming he has to fix. "I don't… tell them things. And I expect them to follow me blindly and trust only *me* to keep them safe. And I don't…. I don't treat them the way a father should. The way a *parent* should. Batman makes—"

Batman is an excuse. Batman is a coward's way out. Why is he making Batman the scapegoat when all Batman has done is help him *protect* them—but Batman *hasn't* done that, because Batman got Jason and Steph killed, when Bruce would've—

"Bruce?"

Bruce blinks. "I'm sorry," he says. "I lost my track of thought."

Damian regrets taking his earlier years for granted, because now it's an inevitable fact of life that he *will* have five hours of homework every night, and the most he'll be able to whittle it down to is three.

It's not that he despises school the same way he did as an angry pre-teen; over time, he… grew to enjoy the reprieve it gave him from life. Doing pointless math problems meant that every equation was the same, at the core of it, and there were no surprises around the corner. Physics and chemistry made *sense*, in a way that few things in reality truly did.

Computer science he had always attributed far too much with their night life for it to ever be anything *but* a means to an end, an everlasting mountain of betterment to scale, but when he

was looking at biology? His mind quietened, for even the brief amount of time he spent writing up lab reports.

But now, *Grayson* is in his favourite study nook. Or rather, the child version of Grayson is. Damian, arms full of laptop and notebooks and the thick textbook they'd been assigned, stands half-hidden by the door frame and watches the tiny boy. He's seated half on the table at the edge of the room, one leg and arm swinging off it as he chucks a ball up in the air and catches it. He looks… insanely bored.

Not my problem, Damian tells himself, and walks on. He ignores the way Dick's head whips to the side at the movement, and quickens his pace to make sure the boy knows he doesn't want to be followed.

About a day since his father had dosed Richard with the serum, and Damian is… well, he's *fine*, but he'd be *more* fine if they could find some end to this whole mess. Something's going on between his father and the rest of the family, something the others have deemed unimportant to let him in on, and he hasn't the faintest idea where to begin digging into it. It… bothers him, far more than it should, because *clearly* if it's something big, they'd tell him.

But it bothers him nonetheless.

So now Damian has to go to his *second* favourite study nook, but that's okay, because at least this means he can pass the kitchen and stop there to grab snacks, which makes up for the inconvenience. He might even decide to stoop to his third favourite instead, and just stay at the breakfast bar and work.

"What're you making?" a chirpy voice asks him, just as Damian's opened the fridge door.

"Food," he says shortly, stifling down the instinctive urge to offer him some. "For studying." If this had been three years ago, he would've added a *go away*.

"What kind?" Dick asks, hopping onto the countertop, right next to where Damian had placed his study gear. "Snack food or lunch food or in-between-snacks-and-lunch food or—"

"Study food. For studying."

"Huh," Dick's nose scrunches up in thought, "I don't think I've ever tried *study food* before. Is that yoghurt?"

Damian wonders if he could fake a headache and hide in his room for the rest of the night. Headaches, he's discovered in the past year, are a wonderful illness that don't make others fuss too badly, but ensure that you can hide in your room and absolutely everyone will leave you alone.

Dick is still speaking. "…so nice on warm days, not like today, because today's so *gloomy.* And we'd make our own…"

And then, to make matters *even* worse, Dick's voice trails off his eyes going glassy. Damian panics and shoves the nearest thing his hand grabs at towards Dick, so now Dick has to worry about why he's holding an apple instead of whatever memory he's thinking of.

There's complete silence in the kitchen as Damian waits to see if Dick will bounce back to happy and chirpy again. Maybe this age is already too old for simple distractions to be effective.

A door slams somewhere in the Manor, making both of their heads lift to the doorway. Before Damian can say anything, or check for intruders – because surely it's much too soon for his father to have returned – a voice calls out.

"Damian!" It's Jason. "You in there? Where is everyone?"

It's so strange to be feeling the waves of relief that are washing over him at the sound of Jason, Cass, and Tim arriving, because normally, Damian hated giving up time alone with Dick. But now there are finally people here who can deal with having this kid around and all the emotions he apparently comes with.

And the intel. Surely they have something. They *have* to have something – Damian doesn't know how he'll deal with dead end after dead end.

"We're in the kitchen," Damian responds, grabbing onto his plate of fruit protectively so his horde of older siblings don't get any ideas.

"Where's Bruce?" Tim asks, walking through the door first. Damian has to hiss at him to get him to stop trying to steal his food.

"It's urgent," Cass says, neatly sneaking her hand in to grab a slice of pear while Damian's busy fending off Tim. He sticks a foot out to trip her up as she steps away, and Cass raises an eyebrow at him, as though saying, *really?*

"Therapist." Alfred had convinced him, when Bruce had trod a hole in the Cave floor while waiting for the others to return.

"Of fucking course he is," Jason mutters under his breath. "Where's Dick? Is he still bleeding?"

Damian blinks. "Uh," he says. Had Bruce not told them?

"Here," Dick says from beside him, head poking out from where Damian had apparently been partially covering up his tiny form. "Hi! I think I know you!"

Three pairs of eyes *stare*.

"Um," Tim says. "Damian?"

"Yes," Damian says tiredly. "This is Richard. He's now five."

"Am not!" Dick argues back. "I'm *seven!"*

“You *look* four.”

“You’re *mean*.”

“Damian,” Jason says. “Quit arguing with the seven-year-old.”

“Dick,” Cass says. “Do you remember who we are?” She signs it as she says it, and Dick’s eyes fixate on her fingers.

Some, he signs back. His hands jerk a little and a frown appears on his face, mouth pouting and cheeks, still round with baby fat, bulging slightly from frustration. “I… it’s *there*,” he says, suddenly sounding much older than he had a few minutes ago, “but sometimes it’s *not*, and even when I can *think* it, if I try thinking about it *more* it… feels weird.”

“Weird?” Jason asks.

Dick toys with the stem of the apple in his hand. “Like it hurts a bit if I try to think about it too much,” he says, avoiding their eyes. “I don’t *want* to think about it.”

Tim’s suddenly there, ruffling Dick’s hair. “You don’t have to think about it,” he reassures him. “Probably better if you don’t. Just… focus on… being your age.”

Damian can’t take any more of this without finding out whether they actually have anything useful. “So?” he prompts.

Jason chews on the inside of his cheek as he looks at Dick thoughtfully, his face completely neutral. “We’ll debrief you fully when Bruce gets back. For now, though, we need to get everyone who got de-aged in one place.”

“Father began the process before he left,” Damian says. “They’re currently being gathered in one of the WE warehouses.” At the questioning looks he receives, he adds, “To ensure what happened to Richard isn’t happening to the rest. In case one of them also received a botched serum.”

Tim frowns. “No, we know it won’t. Or at least, the chances of that are pretty low. Dick’s been regressed like… three or four times now? And he showed symptoms only when he was left for over a certain amount of time. So at this point it’d be definitely have shown up in them if they’d had something wrong.”

Tim thinks he might’ve found some sort of an antidote, Cass says.

“Cass,” Tim hisses. “I *told* you I didn’t want to—”

“More heads are better than just yours,” Cass tells him, eyes stubborn. *And I never agreed to keep quiet about it*, she adds.

Damian doesn’t think he’s ever seen Tim and Cass fight – or even *argue* – over something like this. Something *serious*. There’s a furious debate between the two of them going on before him, but Damian honestly doesn’t care to read their words, because his heartbeat had spiked when he’d registered Cass' words.

“Will it work on Richard?” When his eyes glance to the spot where Dick had been, he’s only slightly surprised to find the spot empty, the apple sitting on the benchtop beside Damian’s notebook.

Damian turns back to the rest of them just in time to see Tim’s retreating back and Cass disappearing into the living room. He wishes Jason had gone too when all he receives from him is a look that’s toeing *pitying* too closely for Damian’s comfort.

“Dick’s is different,” Jason says uncomfortably, after a moment. “The files are probably almost done uploading to the server, so the Batcomputer’ll be able to run more simulations.” He nabs a slice of mandarin from Damian’s plate, but Damian doesn’t really care about that right now. “When the *fuck* is Bruce getting back?”

Jason hates being the oldest, because it means that *he’s* the one who now has to do things like track down the child who used to hold that rank. Cass had taken one look at his face when he’d turned to her, about to ask, and walked off towards the Cave. Tim had given him wide, petrified eyes and told Jason that he had no idea how to deal with kids, which had *clearly* been a lie, because Tim had once been goddamn Robin, whose literal job it is to deal with scared kids.

Ever since Dick had gotten captured and Jason had felt guilty enough about his role in it to stick around, it had seemed like Tim and Cass saw him as… not exactly a replacement oldest brother, but as *an* older brother, or at least an older figure, who they could rely on to do the shit they didn’t really want to. Such as telling Damian that the antidote probably wouldn’t work on his favourite person. Such as chasing after said favourite person.

It had been the most jarring experience to have glanced at the voice in the kitchen and have it belonging to Dick at the age of apparently seven. The last time Jason had seen Dick, he’d had blood streaming down his face and looked like a zombie movie extra. Clearly, the situation had gotten worse, and clearly something had happened to make Bruce decide to regress him *this* far back, instead of like the previous age regression, where it’d only been a few years or so.

“Dick?” Jason calls. “It’s… Jason.” He wonders if Dick can choose to turn off the part of him that remembers them all. He wonders how it must feel to be aged both seven and twenty-seven. When there’s no answer from the dark room, he mutters a “freaking kids, I swear” under his breath and turns to go.

There’s a shuffle from somewhere, and Jason stills.

“Dick?” he says again. “I came to check up on you.”

“I want to be alone,” Dick’s says, voice muffled.

Jason sighs. What lovely irony of life to switch their roles like this. At least Dick hasn’t tried shooting him. The part of him that understands, on an intrinsic level, the need to be alone

sometimes, wants to walk away. But Dick's *seven*, and today is Alfred's grocery shopping day.

"Short chat, I promise," he says. "I'll even… give you candy?"

"Damian's already bribed me with candy."

Of course he has, Jason thinks. "I'll show you where we keep the gymnastics equipment and let you use it." In his mind, he can already picture the five hundred clauses that come with a promise like this, but that can be Bruce's problem to worry about.

"I technically already know where it is," Dick says. His voice is no longer like it had been when Jason had first heard him speak, like he'd been childish glee personified. "But fine."

Jason steps in through the dark doorway. It's one of the unused rooms, and what little furniture there is inside is covered with white sheets. There's a thin layer of dust in here, because unused rooms like this get cleaned properly much less frequently than the rest of the Manor. Light is entering in, but only through the little gaps in the thick drapes, giving the room a faint honey-drenched look.

Dick is curled up at the foot of one of the covered armchairs. Jason wonders why he chose to sit on the hardwood floor over the chair itself, which is certainly much warmer. His fingers are absolutely tiny and nothing at all like the steady, calloused hands of Nightwing that Jason has become so familiar with.

"You probably shouldn't hang around in weird places," he says awkwardly. "In case you feel bad." What did kids do all day, if they didn't have school? "Uh, there's a gaming console in the living room? I can show you how to play."

Dick tilts his head at Jason, making eye contact, and Jason feels something cold slither down his spine at how it almost seems like Dick regresses right before him. It's akin to watching recognition dawn on someone's face, but the exact opposite: Dick's face loses the dark shadows it's had since the three of them returned, and his eyes light up like neon signs.

"Dick?" Jason says carefully, resisting the urge to reach into his pocket and dial Alfred. "You good, kid?"

"I'm feeling a lot better now!" Dick says, practically bouncing on his crossed legs as he speaks. "Help me up?"

Jason wordlessly grabs the two outstretched hands. One second Dick is on the ground, and Jason's pulling him upwards, and the next Dick has somehow climbed up to sit on his shoulders.

"Um," Jason says.

"I'm not too heavy for you, am I?" A pair of eyes peer down at Jason, who hurriedly stifles the urge to flinch back at how *close* he is to Jason's face. "You seem grown up, but…" he wrinkles his nose, "also *not?"*

Dear God, if this toddler calls him *Little Wing*, Jason might just have to leave the country again. “You’re good. I’ll… take you to the living room, then. Watch your head.”

Maybe this isn’t how he’d pictured the conversation going – not that he’d really had anything in mind when he’d decided to find Dick – but at least no one had cried or ran off in an angry huff. He’s just ducked through a hallway when they quite literally run into Damian.

“*Finally,”* Damian snaps. His gaze flickers to Jason’s hands holding onto Dick’s ankles and his eyes narrow, but he doesn’t comment. “Father is back.”

Tim is mad at her, but Cass honestly can’t bring herself to regret telling Damian. Tim’s reasons for hiding it until he could be sure they weren’t going to make things worse were entirely based off fear, and if there’s anything Cass has learnt over the years, it’s that teams are more powerful than individuals. Information – vital, game-changing information – should be shared amongst your team; that’s something Cass has come to believe in over the years, to build around herself as a truth.

Bruce would’ve found out as soon as he glanced at the monitors running simulation programs, anyway.

She listens as Jason outlines what they found, and then there’s a clear pause as they wait for Bruce to tell them why Dick is now seven. Jason’s face is carefully neutral, and Cass looks away before she feels defensive on Bruce’s behalf, and then feels guilty about feeling defensive on Bruce’s behalf.

“What happened with Dick?” Cass says quickly.

Bruce pauses and turns back around from where he’s faced the monitors again, eyes scanning the formulas Tim has been running. He runs a hand over his face before he speaks. “The serum he was given has… a set deadline. The others don’t, that we know of thus far. And,” he glances towards Tim quickly, but it’s enough to make Cass’ heart sink a little in her chest, “the antidote we gave him most likely sped up the process.”

Tim’s face has gone ashen. He doesn’t look at Cass, but Cass can read what his body is screaming.

“Tim, we couldn’t have known,” Bruce says immediately, taking a step closer to him. It’s interesting, Cass notes distantly, because *before*, Bruce wouldn’t have said anything. He would’ve moved on, probably intending on saying these words at a later point that never came.

Tim looks away. “I didn’t want to tell you about these formulas,” he mutters, the words echoing just enough that it reaches Cass’ ears. She doesn’t look at them, because she doesn’t want to see accusation in Tim’s eyes. “Bruce, we can’t make the same mistake we did before. We can’t use these without being *certain*, okay—”

“You’re never going to be certain enough,” Damian interrupts, though his hands are tightly clenched in *fear, fear, fear*. “Shouldn’t we at least give them a choice—”

There’s a *ping* from the computer, and Tim, almost as though his body’s moving entirely on instinct, is over in front of the keyboard in an instant, shoulder to shoulder with Bruce. Cass stays where she is as Damian and Jason crowd the space, reading *them* instead of the computer.

Tim’s shoulders tighten while Bruce’s relax. Damian’s hands clutch the back of the chair. Jason turns and glances to where Dick’s swinging from the bars, in the training area. And Cass knows, immediately, that the results are *good*.

“You found something,” she states, because no one else is going to say it, after what Bruce had just revealed.

“Ninety-three-point-six,” Tim says. He looks at her, his face saying everything he can’t verbalise.

It falls just a little over one percent short of his bar. Cass winces inwardly at the number, and wonders what he would’ve done if she hadn’t outed their finding to Damian.

She wonders what she’ll do if it turns out that the six-point-four percent risk they have of it going miserably wrong becomes their reality.

“We’ve already gathered them all,” Bruce is saying. “We test this out on the samples we’ve collected, and if it pans out, we can ask them.”

It’ll be their risk to take, should they choose to. That’s what Bruce is saying. They all know it never feels like that, not when they’re the ones creating and distributing the ‘antidote’.

It takes two days to be sort out the facilities required to hold everyone in a warehouse for an extended period of time. It takes another day or so to actually gather everyone. An anonymous donation to the GCPD makes sure everyone is fed properly.

The one thing they didn’t really think through is the fact that these are all *children*, and they’ll get bored. Jason bites back a string of curses as he separates the fourth fistfight that’s started since he’s been here.

“For fuck’s sake,” he says, walking over to where Steph is just packing up equipment she’d used to give the kids a thorough medical examination. “We should’ve brought toys or something.”

Steph snorts. “Toys?” she says. “They’re teenagers, not toddlers.”

“Least then they’d kick around a football and not each other,” Jason mutters, pulling out his phone to send a hasty text to Damian. “I thought they’d at least be interested in their phones

or something now."

Steph shrugs. "They don't really have any friends to text, and social media content's probably confusing if you're missing even like the last decade ish," she says. "Starting a fight when you've probably been cooped up for weeks playing the same five games on your phone is *much* better."

"Gee, so nice of you to sympathise with these terrors." They both know his words are completely hollow, because Jason's the main one to make sure this group of children stay alive and somewhat sane ever since they discovered them.

And that's when they get an alert on their comms. Jason and Steph exchange glances as they switch to the main channel. This is the second highest level of importance an alert can have – not a life or death situation, but an emergency nonetheless.

"The antidote," Tim's voice is just slightly out of breath, "it finished synthesising."

Jason's heart skips a beat, and he has to fight not to look around the warehouse filled with teenagers who are all exactly the same age. Twins, but in all the wrong ways. *Like when you're baking and it says to pack the flour,* a voice says in his head, sounding eerily like Steph.

"What do you want us to do?"

Steph cuts in. "It still has the same numbers?"

"Yeah," says Tim, voice quiet.

"Red fucking Robin," Steph hisses, one hand going to the communicator at her ear. "You *cannot* be thinking these kids are old enough to give informed consent! They're *kids*."

"They're *sixteen*," Jason counters. "They're old enough."

Steph folds her arms and looks at him. "And what'll we say to them? Are you going to be the one to tell them that there's like a six percent chance this is going to slowly kill them?"

"When you were sixteen," Tim cuts in, "would you have let a group of vigilantes – most of whom you don't even *know*, really – decide whether or not you could take a shot at getting your life back?"

"I thought you were on my side here," Steph hisses back, but Tim's words ring true. She sighs. "I just wish we didn't have to test it out on them first." They don't say anything to that, because what else is there to say? "Just finished the last of the check-ups, by the way. They're all fine; no one's showing any symptoms like N is."

"Makes sense," Tim says. Jason thinks his voice would hold an undercurrent of anger if he hadn't been so tired, both physically and mentally, anger of the same kind that had flared beneath Jason's own skin when they'd had confirmation that these kids truly had been meant to be sold.

Was it better, he had wondered, to have a set expiry date? Would that be preferable, rather than to spend the rest of your life – albeit probably not the longest one – in captivity by some sick fuck who'd *paid* to have you a certain age?

"I'll ask them," Jason says. "They know me best. They'll probably respond better."

That fact just makes it harder to move aside the thin medical grade curtains that they've strung up in a corner of the warehouse, and step out towards where the kids are piled about. Jason runs his eyes over them before he speaks. He knows all of them by now, all of their names and hobbies and allergies and favourite foods. He might be leading them to their slow and agonising deaths.

Jason clears his throat, but they've all fallen silent anyway, having seen him stepping outside.

"So?" one of the kids nearest him says. "Are we gonna keep de-aging till we turn into babies and then a foetus and then vanish from existence?"

Jason blinks, then gives in to the smile threatening to emerge. "Nah," he says. "But we might've found an antidote." There's silence, complete stillness, as though no one knows quite how to react. Jason wets his lips, then continues. "It should take you back to the exact age you were when you took the drug. But…" he raises his voice when kids start to speak, "there's only about a ninety-four percent chance it'll work. If it *doesn't* work, you'll probably start to die, *painfully*. And I'm talking about leaking from the ears, blood coming out of your eyes, kind of painfully. Up to you.

"But, look… we're gonna keep looking. This isn't the final one; it's just the only one we've found so far. It's not either this antidote or reliving your life—"

"What if we want to?" someone interrupts.

Jason scans the crowd before spotting who it was that spoke. Marie. She was one of the quieter of them, and the second thing she'd asked Jason for was whether she could go to the skatepark next to the apartment she and a few of the others had been allocated.

"Want to what?" he asks.

"Live our whole lives again," she says, now shuffling uncomfortably under the weight of an entire room full of heavy gazes. "I mean… *I* don't wanna go back to my shitty adult life where I had a drug addiction and was couch surfing at my gross ex's place 'cause I'd been evicted."

They probably should've expected this, Jason reflects, because she's not *wrong*. All of these kids are here, in this position, because they'd been targeted specifically. Because they'd been seen as people who most wouldn't notice going missing, or wouldn't really care to follow up on if they *did*.

"If you want to stay a kid," Jason says with a shrug, "then that's fine with us. Better, even. We'll figure out something with the GCPD to fix up your identities and get you proper papers."

“Wait, hold the fuck up,” someone began hotly, and this time Jason knew instantly, from their voice who this kid was. “’Fore we make any kind of decision like that, can we at least see like… I dunno, some kinda file on ourselves?”

“Your files?” Jason asks dryly, raising his eyebrows at Rei. Even with helmet off, the domino mask hides the full effect of it. “You think we just have your whole life story in cute little binders, ready for when you’re de-aged?” When all he receives are folded arms and a smug questioning glance, and a sea of intrigued faces, he mutters some choice words beneath his breath, and says, “I’ll see what I can do.”

He’s met with loud whoops, which he can’t help himself from smiling ruefully at.

Steph, at some point, has emerged to stand beside him. She’s in her Spoiler outfit, but with the hood of her cape down. Her golden hair is still stuffed into a hairnet.

“Kids,” she yells to get everyone's attention, and even through the mask covering the lower half of her face, it’s louder than a gunshot. “If you want to look through your ‘file’, whatever that may be, line up by that wall.” She points to the far left of the warehouse. “If you want to take the antidote, go to the back. If you want to stay the way you are now, go sit over by the Port-a-Potties.”

“What’d you do, teach Little League in your spare time?” Jason murmurs, begrudgingly impressed by how quickly the teens snap to attention. And then when he sees the giant crowd making up the ‘File’ group, he groans. “They probably just want to see what their life was like.”

Steph shrugs. “Wouldn’t you?” she says. “And,” she tugs off the hairnet and pulls up her hood, “since you were the one who got them thinking they might get a life story file, you get to be the one to tell B what their demands are.”

Jason couldn’t see it, but he knew she was smiling that evil smile of hers as she began to take the medical equipment back to their bikes. Why Cass had decided to date this particular gremlin, he has no idea.

Dick has a headache. He always has a headache, but this time he can’t push it to the back of his mind and try to distract himself. This time, he’s disoriented and dizzy and there are blurry bits in his vision.

Dick knows why, though. It’s the memories that bring on the worse headaches. This last week, since he’s been… *changed*, again, he’s spent more time than any other regression flicking his mind forward into memories of his past (future?) self. There’s just so much more to remember now, and Dick honestly can’t help it. He wakes up in the night and he’s surrounded by ghosts of his other selves, every iteration of who he has been and who he isn’t yet, and it batters at his mind like a million tiny needles.

But forcing the new (old?) memories back isn't entirely helpful, either, because then he's lying alone in a giant bed, about half as big as their trailer used to be, and he's wondering why his parents aren't there with him in the middle of the night. And the room looks dark and big and utterly devoid of light, and there's a terrible silence that's almost a tangible noise in itself, from how much space it's taking up in the room.

Dick gets up, cradling the old and battered Zitka in his arms. He can't really bring himself to look at the giant poster of the Flying Graysons, but Zitka is the same comfort she's always been. She's the security blanket he holds as he pads out of his room and into the hallway. From here, it's a series of questions.

Firstly: who is currently in the Manor right now?

It's a shame that the question brings forth a wave of pain that makes Dick squeeze his eyes shut for a moment, before sucking in a shaky breath.

Damian, certainly. Alfred. Bruce. He doesn't know if Tim had stayed here tonight or if he'd gone to his place in the city, like Jason had. Cass is with Steph at their apartment near Steph's university.

Dick stumbles forward another few steps, his fingers clutching tightly to Zitka, and the other hand bracing him against the wall. He can't go to Damian, for obvious reasons: he hates Dick, hates who Dick is now, but more importantly, who Dick *isn't*. It's clear, from the way the other boy has gone out of his way to make their interactions as brief as possible, when he can't just avoid Dick, that he wants nothing to do with him.

Some part of him, very deep down, buried beneath three or four versions of himself, feels a quiet hurt at the thought of alienating Damian like this, but it's not without understanding.

That leaves Bruce and Alfred. Dick in all honesty would much rather Alfred right now, but he hasn't been to Alfred's quarters since… *ages* before this whole incident. He doesn't know if he'll be able to get to Alfred's room if he tries to let in the memories that will take him there.

It's not that Bruce is Dick's *last* choice – he certainly prefers him to the cow grazing downstairs – it's just that there are so many mixed thoughts and feelings stirring within him at the thought of the man that he'd probably get a headache anyway, without all this drug related business.

Dick's fingers touch the cool wood of Bruce's door, and to his surprise, it slowly swings open. That's when Dick distantly remembers that Bruce had stopped sleeping with his door closed when Dick had begun to go to him after nightmares, but the reminder of that sends dizziness crashing over him.

It's happening faster than we wanted it to, an older version of him thinks, somewhere in the back of his mind. Dick doesn't care what it's referring to, because right now all he wants is to sink under the sheets with someone there who he trusts.

A not insignificant part of him wishes Jason were here, though the thought of that is baffling to his oldest self, the first one. Going to *Jason*, his younger brother? He should've just called

one of the Titans. (But Dick doesn't *know* the Titans, which makes this situation so much more confusing, because he also *does* know them, and he remembers his conversation with Donna and how she'd mentioned she'd find time to visit, but he can't really call her because he doesn't know where his phone is and it'd be so horrifically inconvenient and selfish of him to call her yet again in the middle of the night…)

There's a beam of moonlight coming in through the crack in the curtains. Maybe if it weren't so chilly tonight, Dick would just go and sit by Bruce's window and try to draw comfort from just being around someone else. His older self might've done that, but his older self would probably sooner go for a drive than sit like a creep in the dark.

Dick remembers the feeling of wind through his hair from the trapeze, from rooftops, from grappling through Gotham, and he can't distinguish between those memories at all. His brain is mush, a jumbled mess of jigsaw puzzles that had all been thrown into the same container.

Bruce sleeps deeply, now. It's both a surprise and not. Dick tiptoes towards the bed, unsure of how to go on from here.

His mind supplies him with useful memories, of the warmth of his parents beside him as they shared the foldaway bed in their trailer, the feeling of Kory's arms holding him tight and her hair in his mouth when he wakes in the morning, small arms wrapping around Bruce's giant slab of a torso and the feeling of him clutching right back.

It should be enough to convince Dick to burrow into the empty side of the bed, to envelop himself into the comfort of the sheets and heat of Bruce's body. But he can't bring himself to take a step forward. His head still hurts, but the confusion swirling around Bruce might be just as bad.

So of course, this is the moment that Bruce decides to wake up. Dick knows the exact second he spots someone in his room, because his whole figure jerks awake, before his shoulders relax.

"Dick?" he whispers. "Can't sleep?"

This is such a familiar dance, but Dick's head throbs the more the nostalgia hits him. "Head hurts," he murmurs, because the only way through is to stifle all the voices spinning around in his head.

A frown appears on Bruce's forehead, worry driven by the knowledge that none of them know what symptom Dick's going to show next, or *when*. "You want to sleep here?"

Dick can't really say if Bruce has been avoiding him, because they've all been so *busy*, with this case, with their lives, with Gotham (always with Gotham). *No one's* really spent time with him, save for Alfred, maybe, who Dick follows around the house all waking hours. And the animals. It's a good thing there's so much to explore and to play with (and that Damian has a dog who has about as much energy as Dick does), because otherwise he'd be climbing up the walls by now.

Dick doesn't know what to say. Bruce has a misty look on his face, which Dick has been seeing a lot on Alfred as well, lately. He hasn't decided yet if it makes him uncomfortable.

Just when Bruce is beginning to look more and more awkward, Dick slams down whatever box of uncertainly his brain has opened, because *surely* he, as a seven-year-old with the worst headache he's ever had, has the right to seek comfort in the middle of the night.

He doesn't entirely know which version of himself is thinking that, but he's fairly certain it isn't his *current* self. It's thoughts like these that're probably the cause of the headache.

Wordlessly, Dick climbs into the bed, instantly burrowing himself into a tight ball. His muscles relax at the warmth radiating from the space and from Bruce's body; he hadn't even realised he'd stiffened up. Bruce's hand slowly comes up to the nape of Dick's neck, pressing down on *just* the right spots that make it hurt less.

"Better?" he asks, and Dick mumbles a 'yes'.

His head is completely quiet now, as though the others in there, who've been trying to feed him thoughts and emotions and feeling and memories, are… well, he isn't going to *check*, but he thinks they're okay with this. He thinks maybe they miss this.

"Only *three* want to go back?" Tim hisses out. "But… they can't even *drive!"*

Cass gives him a look. "They want a do-over," she says. "And they're probably old enough to have a license."

"But it's barely even a do-over! They have zero friends here, no family, barely anyone has anywhere to *live* – they'll all be sent into the foster system or something!"

"I would've chosen a do-over," Cass says, looking ahead. "In their position. It might not have fixed my mistakes, but I wouldn't go back. Not if it meant…"

Tim knows what she means. Or at least, from everything he knows about Cass, he understands what she means when she says she wouldn't go back.

"Yeah, but," he rubs the back of his neck, "these kids weren't…" His voice trails off at the knowledge that one doesn't have to be raised by an assassin to have had a terrible childhood. He sighs. "I understand it; it's just…"

"You can't personally relate," Cass supplies, finally turning to him. Her lips don't smile, but her face is open and relaxed.

Tim tilts his head in acknowledgement, and doesn't say anything. Nothing really *needs* to be said. The things he would change were more issues happening around him than things done *to* him; all Tim would accomplish if he were to be regressed to sixteen would be having to go

through puberty all over again, and going through that blasted exam for what would be the *sixth* time to get his driving license.

“I should be relieved,” he mutters instead. “I mean, I never wanted this in the first place, right? I didn’t want to have to administer this serum without being *more* sure. And now most of them are safe.”

“But now we’re responsible for all these kids.” She cocks her head to the side. “Mostly Jason, though.”

Tim lets out a snort. “He brought that on himself. He better watch out, though; seems like he’s more like B than he wants to admit.”

Cass opens her mouth to respond, but at that moment, Steph hoists herself up onto the platform they’re sitting atop of, blowing a strand of hair out of her face.

“What’re you crazy kids up to,” she says, pulling down her mask and kissing Cass in greeting. “I have missed you, girlfriend mine.”

Tim has to fulfil his duty as the ex-boyfriend and also brother in this scenario, so he fake gags on Cass’ other side, but he can’t hide the fond smile on his face at the sight of them. “Everything set up?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I can administer them just fine, but…”

Tim is about to shake his head, but hesitates.

“I’ll do it,” Cass says, standing up. “I was the one who… made you tell them. It should be on me if something goes wrong.”

Tim’s so tempted to agree, to hole up in here and surround himself with the healthy, *alive* kids who’re about to be issued proper ID and settled into various foster homes and orphanages for the next two years, but he can’t. “Nah,” he says, with a forced quirk of his mouth. “I’m still salty at you, but I could’ve put up more of a fight if I *really* hadn’t wanted to release them.”

Cass looks at him, unsure.

Steph sighs. “Both of you just come down for moral support and observation,” she says. “There are literally three of them. You guys can hand out the lollipops after I give them the shot.”

In the end, it’s more surprising how *normal* it is. They’re no strangers to having to administer various antidotes to civilians – in fact, one of Robin’s biggest (and, if Bruce is to be believed, *most important)* jobs is to comfort or distract people when Batman does the medical work. This feels like they’re providing these kids with an antitoxin to one of Ivy’s pollens, or a secondary dose after they’ve been exposed to Joker’s venom.

Tim’s subconscious can’t let go of the fact that these three might end up dying right in front of him, bleeding out of every pore until there’s nothing left in them. He closes his eyes for a

moment as his stomach turns at the reminder of Dick's face when *he'd* been bleeding like that.

"Okay," Steph is saying, "just lie down over there… no, you won't just drop dead if you move too much. We can play a movie. Red Robin here—" she pokes Tim in the side, inciting an indignant yelp out of him, "has a cool phone projector he carries around everywhere."

"I don't *carry it around everywhere,"* Tim mutters even as he pulls it out. "I just bring it along to patrol in case it turns out to be useful." Which is has been. Multiple times. He'd even be able to project crime scene photos and notes onto the wall when they're on the GCPD rooftop if they had a decent enough wall up there.

Tim hands his phone to the kids, letting them have free reign over what to choose. It's not exactly a surprise when they go with *Back to the Future*, instead of how they normally choose one of the new animations.

"Will we remember all of this when we… y'know, afterwards?" Em asks.

Tim nods. "Uh, yeah," he says. "It'll either mesh with your memory of when you were sixteen, or feel like you were one day thirty-eight, and sixteen the next."

"Oh." Em wrinkles her nose a little at that. "Won't that be confusing?"

"Hey, question," Jakob breaks in. "Is all this shit confidential? Like, are we allowed to tell our friends and the press?"

Tim chews on the inside of his mouth. "Batman's gonna come talk to you guys afterwards about all that," he finally says.

"He gonna scare us into never talking?"

"You've literally been on the news. It's already *been* to the press."

Tim can't watch the movie after it begins, though it's been a favourite of his since he was small. The familiarity of the dialogue can't distract him from the anxiety itching at him beneath his bones, and he keeps sneaking glances at Em, Jakob, and Rei to check on them.

And then an hour or so later, when Lorraine asks Marty to the school dance, Cass suddenly sits up from where she's slumped in a plastic chair. "It's happening," she says, jumping over to the cots. Tim follows her, heart going a mile a minute.

But there's nothing they can do – this is all a part of the serum's process. The kids had been given adult sized scrubs to wear, to accommodate for their bodies growing; it makes it harder to really see the changes now. But Tim watches, mesmerised, as their faces stretch, the soft skin of childhood facing the weight of over two decades of wear and tear in the span of a few minutes.

They'd administered sedatives, and now Tim's glad for it, because this… looks absolutely *excruciating*. It'd been different to the stuff they'd given Dick before, though the way Dick had screamed still makes its way into Tim's nightmares.

Hair length stays the same, though Tim can see strands coming loose and falling to the stark white pillows. Em has her hand outstretched, palm up, and Tim watches callouses develop and her skin grow rough, scars appearing on her flesh as though etched on there with a quick scalpel.

Jakob's face, which he'd gotten so used to seeing smooth, grows a five o'clock shadow in the span of a few seconds. Holes suddenly dot his face where he'd gotten piercings later in life, and Tim hopes the jewellery he'd been wearing hadn't been too expensive.

By far the most fascinating is watching Rei's tattoo appear, the sleeve showing up in segments. Tim can't help but stare as the lines pop up, like watching an artist's timeskip video of a drawing.

"Their vitals are holding strong," Steph reports, chewing on her lip. "This is weird."

Tim doesn't respond, because his brain keeps throwing worst case scenarios at him. *What if* they end up not stopping, and continue ageing until they grow shrivelled and old, and then fade into a corpse, a skeleton? *What if* this rapid growth, where they had no memories of their adult selves, somehow degrades their brain functions and they end up vegetables? *What if* they—

There's a blur of *something* coming at him, and Tim ducks on instinct. A pen slams into the wall behind his head, and he turns and glares at Cass, who shrugs.

"Watch the movie," she says. "We have three more—"

"Two more," Tim says absentmindedly.

"Might be a third," Cass reminds him, and he wrinkles his nose.

"Don't jinx us. Who knows if fate's too cruel to make this work smoothly *and* block whatever attempt Hollywood makes for another *Back to the Future*."

"I think Em's is slowing down a bit," Steph interrupts, stepping over to the side of Em's cot and eyeing the monitor readings.

"She was the youngest," Cass murmurs, having joined her. "And the first to get the antidote."

Tim watches from the foot of the bed, breathing shallowly as he watches Em's face. It's still recognisable as the teen she'd been this whole time, who Tim barely knows but Jason apparently had supplied roller-skates to at some point.

"Em, hey," Steph says, voice suddenly going clinically warm. She helps her sit up. "How're you feeling?"

"Uh." Em coughs, loud, hacking sounds that make Tim wince. What if he's given her permanent respiratory issues?

Cass is faster than him; she's already got a cup of water in front of the woman before Tim can even think to look around. "Small sips."

Em gulps down the entire thing, though she looks like she's partly dissociating as she does so. Her hands are shaking; it's lucky the cup was only filled halfway. Tim can't stop tracing the changes in her appearance.

"What do you remember?" he presses.

"It's fuzzy," Em admits, voice sounding like she's still got the sedative in her system. "I think… most of it? I remember agreeing to this. Almost wish I hadn't. Hah. It hurt, like, a *lot*, even though I was out. But… it feels more like these past weeks were just some show I watched on a whim. I can remember what I was doing the night I… y'know, took the drug, all that shit, about as well as I remember what I did this morning."

Tim shares a look with Cass, because this is all picking at the science part of his brain, but more than that, he's about a second away from collapsing into a puddle of utter relief.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter just really didn't want to be written lmao (it's probably my least favourite bc i'm v tired of reading/writing dick getting de-aged to this particular age and i've been kicking myself for doing it ever since i posted chap 8 kjsdhf) but hopefully the next chapter will be smoother :D

i have about 10 pages worth of deleted/extended scenes from this fic at this point (i think i cut like 2k from this chapter alone lol) so i'll probably post that at some point after i finish this story, in case i end up using them somewhere else ^~^

thanks for reading!! i hope to update this again sometime this year ;~;

Chapter 10: X

Chapter Notes

few things to note before you get into this:
- if you're still here reading this fic tysm <3
- i know my writing style and certain things w characterisation have changed in the time between writing the last chapter and this one. so if you notice a shift or something i do differently in this it's bc of that, tho i tried to keep it somewhat consistent w the story
- this chapter got split into two bc i hit 7k and didn't manage to get to any of the major plot points i wanted to overall, so it might feel a little slow in terms of plot

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maybe it's because he's had to wake up next to a version of Dick he's never seen before, someone who he recognises like he'd probably recognise all his kids, on some sort of level deep in his soul, if they didn't look how he's used to. Maybe it's because he's forgotten what it's like to see them young enough to still want the comfort of a stuffed animal. But once Dick had told him that his head's starting to hurt, Bruce can't sit by.

And now Dick isn't here, not really, to ask permission. But he'd granted it to Bruce before, so Bruce is going to hope that it'd been for more than a one-off de-aging; Dick at that point had understood that this was going to be for the long haul. Dick's still in there somewhere, in the little boy who's sitting at their breakfast bar and swinging his legs on the stool.

The trouble with this whole 'being a better father and involving your family in your decisions', Bruce reflects, is that it, in fact, requires involving your family in your decisions.

"I don't see why we should just yet," Jason is arguing, waving his fork around. A piece of broccoli goes flying, and no one pays any attention to it, not even Alfred. "He's *just* started feeling the symptoms. It's been one day. The more we give him the serum, the more it'll affect him. Alfred, c'mon."

Bruce doesn't miss the way Jason has used 'Alfred', rather than 'Alfie' as he normally refers to the older man. "The lad hasn't even been this age for half a week," he says finally, after a painstakingly long time spent pouring himself more tea.

Bruce rubs his temple. "How do we know his body, the age it is now, can handle changing when it's that bad?" he says. *You have so much patience for victims as Batman,* Sarah had said to him once. *Why can't you save some of that for your family, too?* "And who's to say these symptoms won't get worse much faster – what if his body gets too weak too soon, and it's too late to change?"

Jason's jaw is set, but Alfred looks like he's contemplating Bruce's words. However, it's Tim who speaks next. He lets out a long breath and cracks his back as he stretches. "Run more tests?" he says.

At this point, that's a given. Bruce is about to respond when Dick speaks for the first time all morning. Bruce can't help remembering back to yesterday, feeling a little lost in time when he'd opened his eyes to see Zitka on the pillow beside him. Dick hadn't gone to anyone last night – Bruce had visited his bedroom to wake him for breakfast – but he'd winced when he'd sat up too fast. Maybe that's why he's been so quiet at breakfast, because the Dick who'd been jumping around the Cave and chattering Bruce's ear off, like a blast from the past, seems to be vanishing the longer time goes on.

"What about what I want?" he says, almost to his plate. "Don't I get a say in the matter?"

"Of course you do, Dick," Bruce rushes to say, just as Jason says, "You have the deciding vote, champ." Bruce doesn't know what to do with a Jason who says things like 'champ', but he'd like to learn.

"If it fixes things," Dick is saying, now looking at them all in turn, "then I'll do it."

Cass, who's sitting on one side of him, nudges his leg. "You don't have to say it to stop us from fighting," she signs. "We still have time to decide. Let Tim run some tests first."

Damian, who's been following this discussion with a scowl from by the window, interrupts whatever Tim had been about to say. "How is this not coercion? If he wishes to take the serum again, then he should." Not waiting to see the reactions to his words, he slides down from his stool and pads over to place his plate in the sink.

Bruce lets out a breath; he can feel Alfred looking at him pointedly. "Damian," he says, "do you have a minute?"

"Fucking finally," Jason mutters into his glass of juice, barely loud enough to reach Bruce's ears.

Damian's blink of surprise makes Bruce feel like a steaming pile of Titus' droppings. "Of course," he says stiffly. "I shall wait for you outside your study."

They'd been making progress, Bruce knows. This fallback to formality is just… it's just Damian coping. It's because of all the changes, and because of the topic of conversation at breakfast, a meal where, previously, they hadn't been allowed to discuss 'downstairs' topics. And now even Alfred is participating, instead of reprimanding.

"Actually, wait for me in my room?" He phrases it as a question, and makes sure to look at Damian until he sees Damian nod, and then leave the room.

"Wo*wee*," Dick mutters. "He's scary sometimes."

None of them quite know what to say to that, so Jason quickly asks if anyone would like a refill of juice.

Tim takes Dick down to the Cave with him, to run some tests, compare samples with those from right after the change into this age. Bruce, meanwhile, does something he probably should've *weeks* ago, and goes to see how his youngest is faring with all this.

There are so many things Bruce needs to keep in mind. He hears Sarah's voice, he hears Alfred's voice, and even Steph's voice, but most of all, he hears Dick's. And despite himself, despite loving Damian, he finds himself wishing Dick were here to help him figure out how to approach this and to help see if Damian's actually okay. But if Dick were here, this conversation – this specific one – wouldn't need to be happening. And what sort of a father is he, that he wants someone else to help him with parenting his child?

Bruce shakes his head, glad of the walk to his bedroom to retrieve what he needs. He really does need to speak to Damian alone, but the timing couldn't have been more convenient.

Damian's standing outside his door – his open door, tapping away on his phone. Bruce wonders if he's texting someone, if it's a school friend or a superhero friend. He doesn't ask, because four kids later he gets that that's a weird question.

"You could've waited for me inside; you're welcome in my room even if I'm not here." That habit might take a while to ingrain, Bruce knows, because even now the only people who're comfortable being in his room without him being in there are Dick and Cass.

Damian shrugs, putting his phone away. "That would just invite you to do the same for mine, and then I'd have to spend my valuable free time resetting my booby traps."

Three months ago, Bruce would've been falling over himself reassuring Damian he'd never enter Damian's space without his express permission. Eleven months ago Bruce would've sternly asked what sorts of booby traps he has. Now, Bruce snorts a laugh, and is rewarded by Damian's pleased smile.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"That obvious, huh," he says ruefully, but he steps over to the little table by the window to get the package that had arrived at some point in the middle of the night. "Your mother sent you another one of her care packages. I think she's afraid of your booby traps as well." Talia's packages normally either arrived through the mail or in Damian's room. Bruce wonders if Damian ever wishes for it to be delivered in person.

"In her last message, she said she wanted to give you something. Tea or herbs," Damian says. His hands twitch by his side, but he doesn't step forward.

Bruce gestures towards he box. "It's yours to open," he says. "You'll probably know your mother's packing style better than I do."

A knife appears out of nowhere, and Damian deftly slices through the tape holding the box together. Inside are three more boxes, labelled very clearly. The one with Bruce's name is in bold writing, with very little adornment. The one for Damian has his name written in Arabic in a deep green, glittery ink, and there's washi tape with little kittens on it keeping the flaps closed.

“Clearly she has favourites,” Bruce says mildly. He’s curious about what Talia sent him; surely she would’ve sent it to him separately or put in some sort of note if she didn’t want him to open it in front of Damian or something.

Bruce borrows Damian’s knife and carefully slices open the box. Inside is… a box of tea. There’s also a note, which reads: *Bruce, I would’ve sent this directly to Richard, but he’s indisposed now, so please make sure it reaches Alfred. Damian is now a growing boy, and tradition dictates he drink this to strengthen his body as it goes through growing pains. Please pass it on to Alfred for me – the second box is the tea I recommended for him the last time I visited.* — T

“Huh,” Bruce says. “It’s for Alfred. Tea.” He’s faintly amused at the thought of where Talia places him now, in her head – where the hierarchy of Damian’s caretakers goes from Dick to Alfred to… Bruce at a very distant last.

“Oh.” Damian fidgets beside him. “What did you want to talk about?” he asks again.

Bruce drags a chair out from the table, and sits in it, facing Damian. Damian, to Bruce’s joy, sits without being prompted. “This whole thing with Dick… I haven’t had a chance to touch base with you, see how you’re doing. I know it’s a lot, especially when you have to balance school and normal life along with it.”

Damian shrugs. “It’s nothing I haven’t handled before,” he says offhandedly.

Bruce leans forward a little, trying to make eye contact with Damian. *A lot of your friends and coworkers have children,* Sarah had mentioned. *What do you like – or not like – from how you’ve seen them handling their kids?* And he’d… well, Ollie had come up far too often, because Bruce knows that he’s always been jealous of how easily Ollie parents. How he’s able to own up to his mistakes and work to fix them. And how, despite everything, he’d been able to make amends with Roy, connect with Connor despite their rocky start, and even get through to Emi. So when he leans forward to speak with Damian, he takes in a breath and tries to remember what Ollie had mentioned to him, offhandedly, when Bruce had brought up Emi once.

“I know,” he says, “but you have all of us, and you have *me*. If you need me, or want to talk to me about it. I know I can’t replace Dick, and I wouldn’t want to, but if you need me, then I’m here.”

Damian blinks at him. “I know that, Father.”

“And,” Bruce takes in Damian’s face, the way he’s looking at him, the slump of his back as he leans against the chair, because he knows it’ll change the moment he gets this out, “there’s something I need to tell you. The others know already, and I’d rather you heard it from me.”

He hadn’t woken up this morning expecting to have this conversation, but he’d seen the way Damian had picked up on the other kids’ reactions to him. And he’s been granted a small reprieve – they all have – with the unexpected win of re-aging the children who’d wanted to return to their adult lives. Bruce had had a habit of pushing until the finish line, of not resting or pausing for a moment until a case got closed, but now, he realises all that he’s missed out

on. For as long as he's Batman, he'll have cases; but if Dick could find a way to raise Damian even with all the responsibilities he had while he'd been Batman, then surely Bruce can do the same.

He takes a deep breath, and begins.

Cass hasn't spent enough time around children the age that Dick is right now to build up enough of an opinion of them. All she can really say is that they're loud and boisterous and get into Cass' space without warning and give spontaneous hugs, and are a little gross with their bodily fluids and eating habits. But overall, Cass still doesn't have a *proper* assessment of them, because she's finding Dick to be much more adorable than the typical seven-year-old.

Tim's chattering to them – or, to himself, really – and Dick is trailing behind him, fingers leaving a trail along the tops of benchtops and the sides of the various little keepsakes they've collectively stuffed the Cave with. Dick's never been particularly big – especially not to Cass, who's grown to be taller than him – but now he has some extra element of *smallness*, as though he's missing something that had once made him the Dick Grayson she knows.

"Let's see here," Tim peers closer at the Batcomputer screen; he *definitely* needs glasses soon, though Cass is certainly not going to be the one to break that to him, "last time we took some skin samples, hair, blood, urine—"

"Do I have to *pee* in something?" Dick asks with fascinated horror. "'Cause I just went."

Tim ruffles his hair. "We'll leave that till last."

"Come on," Cass says to Dick, "you can have a go on the practise bars while we wait for Tim to set everything up." That way, he wouldn't make himself sick trying to drink a litre of water in one go.

Dick's eyes light up. "Really?" He doesn't wait for a response, running on ahead.

"Warm up first!" Cass yells.

"Cass," Tim says, to get her attention. Then he signs, "What do you think?"

Cass shrugs. "I agree with Bruce on this one," she signs back. "The way his body was literally collapsing in on itself the last time… I don't want to see that happen when he's this small. No kid deserves to go through that."

Tim chews on his lip. "But worst case scenario?"

Cass levels a glare at him. “Are we going to go through this same argument every time we need to make a decision about him?” she signs. Distantly, she hears Dick calling out to her in a singsong voice, letting her know he’s done with warm-up. “You said the same thing when we wanted to give him the serum last time—”

“And what, at least this time Bruce is actually asking our opinions?” Tim hisses the words this time. Cass gives him a look, jerking her head to the training area behind her where Dick’s doing somersaults. “I don’t get why you keep siding with him,” he signs, turning around back to the computer screen. “Do you even care about him at all, or do you just want this to be over as soon as possible so you can go back to your cutesy little apartment with your girlfriend?”

Cass blinks, unexpectedly stung. “He’s my brother too,” she says out loud, and from the corner of her eye she sees Dick pause on the mats for just a moment. “There’s no easy solution.”

Tim sighs. “Just ones we can live with. Sorry,” he adds, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck. “I shouldn’t have… said that.” Blowing out a breath, he opens one of the drawers and pulls out a new, sterilised testing kit. “Everything should be set up now.”

“Dick,” Cass calls, and waves him over.

She… doesn’t know what’s going on with her and Tim, who she’s closest to out of all her other siblings. Or maybe that’s why she can say the things she says, and vice versa; they’ve fought beside each other, just the two of them, as partners. There are things that Tim will confess to Dick that she knows he might not to anyone else, because having an older sibling allows you that freedom, but Dick will never reciprocate to the same degree, *because* he’s the older sibling. Cass has spent far too long contemplating the structure of their messy family, and she knows that the relationship between Dick and Jason is probably the closest thing the family has to the one between herself and Tim. She sometimes found herself looking to Damian, and wondering who he’s going to be on equal footing with.

“Sit up here,” Tim was saying to Dick, who hopped up to the bench with ease. “Okay, we’ll start with the easy stuff first. You’ve been drinking water?”

Dick nodded eagerly, legs swinging faster. “I drank that *whole bottle*.”

Despite the situation, Tim cracked a smile. “Good job, bud. Open your mouth, I need a saliva sample.”

Dick obediently opens his mouth as wide as he can, and Cass is startled to find he has teeth missing. She frowns. “Did your teeth get knocked out?” she asks.

Dick’s eyes light up. “I pulled them out all by myself!” he says. “Look, this one’s wobbly!”

Cass looks on in horror as Dick put a finger in his mouth and moved one of his tiny little canine teeth. She looks at Tim, who was biting his cheek. “What?” she says to him.

“They’re his baby teeth,” he says with a smile. “Yours probably fell out ages ago.”

Cass doesn't say anything for a moment, watching distantly as Dick allows for swabs of his nose and ears. "When you say 'fell out'…" she begins, and trails off, hoping Tim will fill in the blanks for her.

Tim's smile falls. "Uh," he says, ducking his head and clearing his throat. "Humans have two pairs of teeth. Their baby teeth, or milk teeth, that they're born with, which fall out roughly between… I think four and ten? Sometimes it takes a little longer. And after a tooth falls out, a new one grows back in."

"I always bury my teeth under where our trapeze tent is," she can hear Dick saying, "'cause of the tooth mouse. My parents say I don't need luck to be a trapeze artist, but I figure it can't hurt, right?"

Cass digests this information a little numbly, snapping on surgical gloves as she stands beside Tim. She doesn't want to think about how she never realised her own teeth were falling out of their own accord, because surely some of them were – she hadn't been *that* bad at fighting at the beginning that they would all be knocked out.

"You think you can pee in a cup just yet?" Tim asks, and Dick scrunches up his face for a moment before he shakes his head. Tim sighs, and says, "Okay, we'll move to the blood sample then. I think that's the last of it."

Cass finishes putting in the samples into the computer, tapping her fingers impatiently as she watches the loading symbol – which Babs had discretely made into a bat flying around in a circle, probably expecting Bruce to change but he never had.

And then something makes her whirl around.

"Wait," Dick is saying, backing away from Tim. "I don't want to."

"You won't feel a thing," Tim tries to reassure him, but Cass can tell that Dick doesn't find anything about the giant needle that Tim is brandishing reassuring. "It'll be over before you know it, and I'll give you a lollipop."

Dick doesn't look like he's even hearing what Tim is saying. His breathing comes in harshly as his eyes fixate on the syringe in Tim's hand, and Cass can tell he's seconds away from bolting.

"Dick," she says, from where she's standing. She hops up onto the computer; now that Tim's attention is on her, she gives him a quick but discreet gesture to put the needle down. "It's not the serum. It won't hurt you."

"But…" Dick's eyes flicker to Tim, and his hands spasm where they're gripping the edge of the bench. "Last time… and the time before that… those were *really bad*."

Tim unexpectedly moved forward, wrapping his arms around Dick's bony shoulders. Dick stiffens for a moment, and then he wraps his arms around Tim again. When he speaks, though, his voice doesn't belong to his body. "It's okay now," he says, with the weight of years beyond him. "Sorry 'bout freaking out on you."

Tim draws back; Cass' skin is crawling at how strange it is to hear such an… *experienced* voice coming out of such a young mouth. This, she thinks, is yet another reason why it's hard for any of them to get to know Dick like how they know each other. He hides far too well. "Uh," Tim rubs a hand through his hair, and fumbles behind him to grab the syringe again, "yeah, no worries. It's not surprising you'd have bad memories associated with needles by this point."

Dick shrugs, another gesture that doesn't seem like how he was just a minute ago. "We've been dealing with needles our whole lives," he says. "Hand me a lollipop like you promised, and I won't let him cry."

He says it with a bright grin, and she and Tim try to smile back in face of the horrifying implications of Dick's words.

The results come back that night, and they aren't good. Jason doesn't know why he expects them to be, at this point. He stands outside Dick's bedroom, the door closed and the room dark. A few minutes after taking all the tests, he'd started what looked like an absolute shitfest of a migraine, and they'd taken him up to his room to get some rest.

Jason partially blames what Cass had told him about the incident with the blood sample. But he knows, deep down, that it would've happened sooner or later. Dick likes to be in control of himself far too much to allow his child self so much free reign; and maybe that's why this is happening more and more. Maybe the solution is to bring Dick back to an older age.

"No," Bruce says when Jason mentions it, shaking his head before Jason's even finished speaking. "I'm not brushing you off, Jay. But this is the reason we de-aged him to a younger version – the symptoms seemed to hit quicker when he was closest to the age he was when he… the age he is."

Jason rubs the bridge of his nose, suddenly tired in a way he really shouldn't be after waking from sleep just two hours ago. "Then, what? We just tell the Dick in his head to quiet down a little? This body has barely lasted half a week."

Bruce looks just as weary as Jason feels. "We'll need to give him the serum again soon, preferably before he starts bleeding like before."

"So," a voice speaks up from behind them, "about that." Tim comes in carrying a basin with red fluid. It takes a while for Jason to understand the implications of it.

"He's already started?" he has to ask.

Tim nods. “I went in to see how he’s doing, and he was asleep, but…” He gestures to the bowl in his hand, and the wet rag stained with red. “It’s only from his ears so far, if that’s any consolation. I think Damian’s in there with him now.”

Jason turns to Bruce, opening his mouth to speak, but Bruce looks far too grim – tired to the bone kind of grim, rather than the sort that Jason’s used to seeing Bruce wear – so he lets the man go on ahead without a word, following behind him into the room.

Damian is sitting stiffly in the armchair beside the bed when they enter, and he doesn’t look up when they enter. He has a bloody rag in his hand, but the figure in the bed looks like he’s fast asleep.

Jason goes to stand by the armchair, watching as Bruce silently crouches down by the bed and checks Dick over. He pulls out a little torch from inside his pocket and places it by Dick’s ear, peering inside. There’s no change in his body language to indicate what he sees; he moves on to Dick’s nose soon.

Jason taps Bruce before he can consider lifting Dick’s lips to check his gums, signing to him to let the kid sleep while he can. Bruce blinks, clearly a little wounded by the fact that Jason thinks he has to remind him of this, but honestly, Jason doesn’t care how wounded Bruce feels.

They step outside, and Bruce runs a hand through his hair. “It’s not as fast as before,” he allows, when they’ve left the door just slightly ajar behind them. “Though it’s hard to say for certain whether it hit him so fast before because of all the strenuous activity, or if it was because of his age, or the timing…”

“Are you going to change him again?” Damian’s voice is short and sharp, but when Jason glances up to look at him, his eyes aren’t on any of them.

Bruce sighs. “Tim and Cass’ findings with the samples say that this is going to keep getting worse at a faster rate than before.”

“So, what you’re *really* saying is, if we don’t get him some kind of cure soon, he’ll just…” Jason doesn’t know how to finish that sentence. None of them are sure of what’ll happen – will Dick just bleed out? Will his body give out, unable to handle the pressure of so many consciousnesses in one mind? There are too many uncertain variables in this, and every time they get closer to finding something, they’re met with another obstacle and never the answer they’re searching for. At this point, he has little doubt in his mind that even Bruce, whose primary goal in life is to fix things and act unselfishly, will throw away the latter of those and act *very* selfishly if it means finding a way to fix Dick.

Dick feels wrong in his skin. But the sensation is becoming familiar to him now; he registers it the moment he comes to, but he shoves it to the back of his mind. That's easier to do now, to ignore things and compartmentalise. Bruce taught him that, when he was struggling.

"Dick?" he hears. "Can you open your eyes for me, chum?"

He knows that voice, and though it's been over a year by this point, there are moments he wakes up and hears it and he longs for different ones. He shoves that into the same little box as the other feeling, and then he forces himself to open his eyes. Robin has to wake up.

"That's it, you're doing great," Bruce says, and Dick almost smiles. "Don't try to talk just yet."

His face looks far more lined that the Bruce that Dick had seen last – both yesterday and… *his* yesterday. Dick frowns, because… he knows what that means, and yet when he tries to form a coherent thought, tries to put it into words that he can verbalise, he draws a blank.

Someone – *Tim*, his brain fills in – is lifting a small cup of water to his mouth. Dick wonders where Alfred is, but his mind supplies him with that answer too. *Probably upstairs, keeping himself busy with something.* The thought feels like it's missing something, as though it got cut short halfway through, like he had a word in his head but the moment it entered his consciousness, it was sent back to an uncomfortable 'tip of the tongue' place.

The water helps. It's cool and slightly metallic, like it has more iron in it than the water upstairs, though Alfred insists that they're both from the same supply. Dick has tasted a lot of different waters in his not so many years; he isn't picky about it.

"You feeling okay now?" Jason asks. It's strange how Dick can look at these half strangers and know things about them. It's strange that that knowledge will sometimes be there to draw from and sometimes disappear.

He nods in response, curling his hands around the tiny cup. Tim releases it, taking a step back to stand in line with the crowd of people who're currently standing around pretending like they aren't watching Dick's every move.

Bruce is the only one he recognises, so he looks at him when he says, "Yeah, kinda woozy. But mostly fine."

But Bruce is frowning as he looks searchingly at Dick, as though there's something he can't find. Dick doesn't like how the look prickles at his skin, like he's supposed to be something he's not. "Dick, do you know who I am? Can you tell me how old you are?"

"I know who you are, Batman," Dick says in that same matter of face voice. He wonders if he should make his voice lighter, a little smiley-er. But he doesn't really have the energy to do that, nor the desire. "And I'm nine."

Bruce blinks, startled. "You're *nine*." He repeats it as though it should mean something to Dick.

“I thought we set it to ten,” Damian says. Dick can’t look at him, because when he does, the woozy feeling comes back, from the sense that there’s information coming to the forefront of his mind and then being dragged back away from him.

“We did,” Tim says, frowning at a thin screen in his hands. “It’s still set to ten. But for some reason…”

“Dick,” Cass steps forward, leaning down a little so she can look at him in his eyes. “How long have you—”

“Wait,” Bruce interrupts. “Dick, how do you know me?”

Dick snorts humourlessly. “I first met *you*-you at the circus, after my parents were killed.” It’d taken him a while to be able to say the words without feeling the emotion behind them, without flickering back to the nightmares and the horror and the *grief*, but now he uses it like a weapon, ready to be inflicted upon his teachers who try to get him to participate in class, or the ‘well-meaning’ elite society that run in Bruce’s circles. It doesn’t get the same reaction out of this group, and something in the back of his head chuckles. “And I guess I met the other you – Batman – when I’d break out of the juvenile centre.”

Bruce is nodding, though the others aren’t. “Okay,” he says, “how long has it been since I took you in?”

“Six months and six days,” Dick responds promptly.

And that’s when Bruce’s face does a twisty thing that Dick doesn’t like to look at. “Oh,” he says. “We’re hunting for Zucco.”

Dick nods, and doesn’t say anything more. If he’s being honest with himself – which has been coming a little harder than it used to, before, but he tries – then he’ll be the first to admit it’s because his head is suddenly feeling *tight*, as though there’s too much crammed in there, like the feeling you get just before burping.

He blinks, and when he opens his eyes, there’s a hand on his shoulder. “You alright?” Jason is asking, peering down at him.

“Of course I am,” Dick responds. “What happened?”

“You started swaying. Bruce went to get you something to eat.” Cass signs her words and Dick finds he can still understand it just like he always could – can? – without that same sick feeling returning.

Tim and Jason and Damian are crowded around Tim’s tablet, and Dick gets a strange sense of foreboding, until Cass glares at them and they scatter. Bruce comes up to him a moment later, with Alfred trailing behind him.

“Alfred!” The name is out of Dick’s mouth before he can rein it in; it’s surprising how much more comfortable he feels at the presence of the older man.

“Master Dick.” Alfred offers him a small but warm smile, and Dick finds it in himself to return an even smaller one. “Bruce tells me you’re feeling rather lightheaded.”

Dick shrugs. “It’s the others,” he explains, and Bruce sucks in a breath. “They keep messing with my head.”

He’s clearly gotten everyone’s attention now, and he hates that. He lowers his gaze to the tray Alfred has placed beside him, and grabs one of the crackers there to nibble on.

Bruce runs a hand through his hair. “We knew we were running out of time,” he says, voice sounding older than Dick has ever heard it. His own Bruce just sounds… closed off, not *tired* like the way this man is.

“B, I think I might have answers about the age thing,” Tim calls. His voice echoes loudly around the Cave; Dick’s struck with memories that aren’t exactly his of Tim’s giggles as Dick teaches him acrobatics.

Bruce peers at whatever data Tim’s pulled up over the boy’s shoulders. Dick watches as the rest of the people in the Cave – his siblings, and isn’t that a crazy thought? – crowd around Tim. Damian tries to kick Cass behind the kneecaps to get a better view, and she does something to his arm that bends him over backwards.

“Kids,” Bruce murmurs at them distractedly. “Your brother is younger than all of you, and much better behaved.”

“That’s because he’s traumatised,” Damian responds, and Bruce grunts a little just as Tim elbows Damian in the gut.

“I think he’s being… drawn to times of greater emotional significance? Or just emotion in general,” Tim explains.

Jason frowns, and starts ticking off things with his fingers. “Okay, so the first time was when Bruce—” Tim stands on his foot and he abruptly switches tracks, “after he found out I died, the second time was when—”

“I know what Father did, Todd,” Damian says, irritated. “And I would’ve appreciated it if one of you had informed me sooner.” He directs this towards Tim, who blinks in surprise.

“Dami…” he says, then trails off. “Wait… *Bruce* told you?”

“Yes I did,” Bruce interjects. He pointedly adds, “You can all interrogate each other later.”

Tim visibly bites back whatever he’d been about to say as Jason continues, “So then the next time, we age him up and he goes to the nearest shitty event in his life. And then we age him down and he…is fine?”

Cass is looking intently at Dick. “Tim said ‘emotional significance’,” she muses. “Maybe when he gets older he finds that time to hold more emotional significance?”

And that's when Dick feels a faint buzzing in his ear start up. "Stop," he says, jumping off the cot and pacing away from them. "Stop… *talking* about it."

Alfred speaks before anyone else can say anything. "Would you like to come upstairs, Master Dick? It's much warmer, I can assure you."

After a moment, Dick nods, and heads there with him. To his surprise, it's just as dark in the Manor as it had been in the Cave. "It's night?" he asks.

Alfred offers him a smile. "Yes. You were out for almost the entire day."

Alfred is leading him towards the kitchen, but Dick has to stop in the middle of the hallway. He can't continue until he knows, and he doesn't want the accompanying headache that'll ensue if he tries to search for the memories. "Alf," he begins, "we did it, right? We got Zucco?"

Alfred glances back at him. "Yes," he says. "The two of you did."

"Did I kill him?"

There's silence for a moment in the hall, before Alfred exhales and says, "No, dear boy. You didn't. You and Batman gathered enough evidence to make sure he would be in prison for a very long time."

Dick shifts his weight. That doesn't feel as gratifying as he'd thought it would've, to hear that at some point in the future – and hopefully the very near future – he'd gotten him. He doesn't know if it would've been any more satisfying to hear that he'd killed him.

"If that's all," Alfred's tone is all brisk now, "then follow me and I'll find you some dinner."

The moment Dick leaves the Cave, Bruce is bombarded from all sides with very different things.

"So like Cass was saying, I think it's because adult Dick considers his seven – almost eight – year old self to be the last time he was happy or at peace or something," Tim is saying.

"Hey, why don't I have access to Dick's records from before he was your ward?" Jason calls out to Bruce, and Bruce finds a tablet shoved in front of him with the 'Access Denied' error page showing.

"Bruce?" Cass is yelling over the din, from all the way over at the Batcomputer. "We got a hit on them two hours ago."

Bruce ignores everything else. “What?” He narrowly misses bumping into Damian as he runs over to Cass.

He really should get around to getting a few more monitors here, he thinks as the others crowd around the chair.

“It’s…”

“That’s just outside Gotham!” Tim says.

“They’re drawing us out,” Damian says, his voice stiff. “They know it was us who ruined their operations. It’s clearly a trap.”

“Trap or not, it’s our best lead,” Jason says. “It’s… wait, is that the same building as before?”

Cass is shaking her head even before he finishes speaking. “No, but the blueprints are *extremely* similar.”

“Again, this is a trap.”

“B?” Tim looks up at Bruce.

Bruce leans over Cass’ shoulder and goes through the fragments of footage and the stills they have that pinged their facial recognition system. “We need to do reconnaissance before we can make any plans. Damian’s right – it’s probably a trap. But Jason’s right as well—” (“someone’s been listening in their therapy classes,” one of them mutters), “it’s our best lead yet. If they get cocky and think they can take us down, then that means they’ll have enough big hitters there to lead us to the top of the chain. We just need to think smart.”

There’s a moment of quiet, and then they begin to speak over one another again. Bruce resists the urge to rub the bridge of his nose.

“I bags recon with Cass!”

“Now? Are we going now? It’s already pretty dark outside.”

“I would prefer to go with Damian. He makes better decisions.”

“Hey, can you give me access to these files?”

“Oh my *god*, you weren’t even there for that!”

“Jason, why do you want access to those?” Bruce asks tiredly, picking out the one thing that’s actually aimed at him. “You should ask Dick if he’s okay with you seeing his early records.”

“He knows all of ours,” Jason says with a shrug. “I just want to know what he meant by juvenile centre.”

Bruce opens his mouth to respond on autopilot, and then stops with a frown. “What do you mean?”

The rest of them have quieted, listening to them. “He says he met Batman when he’d sneak out of the juvenile centre?”

Ah, Bruce thinks. Finally, an easy answer. “Yes,” he says, mind flicking back to the days when he’d run into a tiny child bundled in socked hands and feet. He almost smiles. “He was determined to find Zucco, so he’d sneak out to try and track him down. And you know how the juvenile centre used to be – it’s why I took him in. How do you tell a kid who’s just lost his parents that sneaking out is a bad idea when the place he keeps sneaking out of is just as bad?”

Seeing Dick at this age has brought forward all sorts of memories. He’s even smaller than Bruce remembers – when he’d first seen Damian, he’d thought to himself, *he’s just as tiny as Dick had been when he was that age*. But that probably isn’t true; Dick has his parents’ build – the slim, compact body of an acrobat. And even though Damian’s turning out more like Talia every day, rather than Bruce’s stocky, muscled up body, Bruce has never seen him as small as Dick currently is. His other kids he’s never seen as young as this…

He’s broken out of his nostalgic reminiscing when they break apart into chatter once again.

“He never told *me* he was there,” Jason’s muttering, arms crossed. “I thought you picked him up from an orphanage like you did with me.” Bruce tilts his head a little, because… that’s a rather oversimplification of the events surrounding Jason coming to live in the Manor.

“Well, we were at the demolition together, and he didn’t tell me then either,” Tim counters, frowning down at the screen in his hand. Bruce remembers that day; it’d taken himself and Lucius over a decade to get them to demolish that centre, and it’d been another year before the youth rehabilitation facility had been up and running.

Bruce doesn’t really know what they want him to say. He shrugs, knowing full well that Dick is reluctant to share details about those early years, particularly with his younger siblings. “Ask him, but only once he returns to his proper age. If I catch wind of any of you questioning Dick now, or before he’s recovered, you’ll be on bathroom duty in the Cave for a month.”

The grimaces he receives assures him that his words will be heeded, but Bruce can’t help but worry. It’d taken him a long time to gain Dick’s trust; it’d taken Dick a long time to get anywhere near the cheerful, happy child that everyone remembers the first Robin as being.

“All right,” he says. “Let’s get a roster going. We need as much information as we can, as quickly as we can.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading!!! i'll be honest, i had this written half of the chapter up since like february, but only now decided to split up the chapters lmao. i have no idea when i'll be able to write more, but we've only got a few chapters left to go (i think) 💪

Chapter 11: XI

Chapter Notes

not to flex too hard but i'm updating this less than two months after the last chapter 😌

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He takes Cass with him tonight, and lets the others go on the normal patrols. Taking Cass is safe, because if she decides to sneak off and go off-plan, which probably happens more often than Bruce wants to admit, then she has the lowest chance of getting caught.

It's a cloudy night, which is exactly what Bruce prefers. Though it's a half moon, there are storms on the horizon, and the winds are a little too fast to allow for any clear skies. And there's nothing worse than a clear sky on a stake-out.

They've gone around the perimeter twice, placing tiny cameras on trees and littering the area with small enough metal particles and debris that their tech won't be the first thing to pop up if someone does a scan of the surroundings. And now they wait, sitting in front of the main exit.

It's almost exactly like the place they'd rescued Dick from, so many months ago. Being here, at night, and trying to catch a glimpse of someone entering or exiting the building… it's bringing back memories Bruce doesn't want to think about.

"Are you alright?" he signs to Cass, who's crouched beside him and monitoring the cameras they've placed.

She blinks as she lifts her head to his fingers, and Bruce knows he's ruined her focus. "Yes," she responds, her hands lit by the dim light of the screen in front of her. "It's a little cold. Are you?"

Bruce tilts his head a little; this is the first time all night he's thought about the chill in the air. He's so used to cold nights and freezing winds. Instead of responding, he shuffles closer to Cass, draping his cape over her. And then he stiffens and wonders what he'll do if she shrugs it off and moves away, which she has every right to do after their last conversation, their last *proper* conversation…

Cass doesn't move for a moment, and then lets out a breath and moves closer, shifting the screen to hide the glow from anyone who might be patrolling. "Guard rotations every forty-five minutes," she murmurs; Bruce has to strain to catch her words. "No one going in or out at this time, though we'll need more data on that. External cameras have a range of approximately four metres, though they could have more on their heat sensors."

Bruce hums. “Makes sense.” Signing, at least, keeps his fingers from freezing, and with the glow of the screen half hidden beneath his cape, it’s much easier to see. “In this weather, we stick out like a sore thumb.”

Cass takes a moment to respond. “If this is the same as before,” she signs carefully, “then there are captives in there. But between us, there are enough. They’re not powered. They’re just normal people, who’re trafficking children. We’ve dealt with their kind before.”

Bruce nods. “Yes,” he says, and immediately regrets speaking aloud when his breath becomes visible in the air. He wants to say, *the only reason we see them as the adversaries they’ve become is because of what they did to Dick*. They’ve dealt with trafficking before, and it seems like every time they take down one major drug dealing operation, another five pop up in its place. They even have a protocol in place for the legal side of taking down traffickers, one that he and Jim worked together to formulate.

But Cass already knows that; they all do. Maybe it’s because they’re all younger than Dick, and have always seen him as someone eternally present, just like Alfred, that this is coming as a harder hit than most. Dick had been, in some ways, infallible, and by not only taking him down physically, but stripping away layers of who he is and who he’s ever been, the kids have been shown parts of Dick that younger siblings, family members, probably never saw. Or should see, if Dick had anything to say about it.

It’s something Bruce fears, about the aftermath, when he lies awake at night and his mind shows him endless outcomes from this twisted situation they’ve found themselves in. It’s one thing to be injured in the field at the hands of criminals; it’s entirely another to wake up to realise that you’ve lost months of your life to yourself, that those around you know parts of you that you might not have wished for them to ever see.

Cass taps his back three times. “Next round,” she signs, and Bruce gives her a nod.

It’s quiet when he gets back. Bruce had dropped Cass off at her and Steph’s apartment, declining the offer of staying for an after-patrol snack. It’s Tim’s night off – normally, he’d be with his team or catching up on work or whatever it is he does when he’s at home, but nowadays he works obsessively at the files they’ve gathered. Bruce doesn’t exactly know what Jason’s schedule is, but lately, they’ve gotten used to him sticking around the Manor more often than not during his off hours, especially with Dick being so young and showing symptoms so quickly. It’s late enough that Bruce expects Dick is asleep, but that’s an assumption for Dick of the past – no, *present*. This child, he knows, has issues with falling asleep, with nightmares, with trusting the giant house he’s been brought into with unfamiliar people.

Damian’s in the little study nook by the kitchen, aggressively chewing a pencil as he glares at a worksheet displayed on his laptop.

“Damian,” Bruce says quietly. “Going alright?” He tries to discreetly sneak a glance at the screen, but Damian does something that makes the screensaver appear.

“Father,” he says, stifling a yawn. “How was the stake-out?”

“Good. Straightforward. We managed to plant all the bugs and get a decent understanding of their security.” And then, before Damian can ask any more questions related to their night life, he says, “What’re you working on?”

Damian lets out an irritated breath. “Homework. For the biomechanics elective.”

“Biomechanics, huh?” Bruce glances at the page, looking at the equations on the page. Damian had doodled a little figure in the margins, skiing down a hillside. He’d also apparently erased the figure’s bloody death as it crashed at the bottom, though not well enough. Bruce hides a smile, pretending not to notice. “You seem to be doing well. You’re liking it?”

Damian shrugs. “I’d prefer to have taken the animal biology course, but apparently there weren’t enough students interested.”

Bruce frowns. He’d taken a class or two during his time in high school that’d had just three people enrolled; he wonders if he should make a call to the headmistress.

“Can you take it next term?” he asks, and Damian shrugs. Bruce, who’d shrugged for most of his childhood after his parents had died, has now, after five children, come to realise why adults hate shrugs.

There’s a silence, and Bruce clears his throat. “Well, don’t stay up too late,” he says, knowing it’s already well beyond the normal bedtime of even a high schooler. “Did you want a snack?”

“Alfred has already left me some.”

Bruce nods. “I… will leave you to it, then.” He wonders if telling Damian he can come to Bruce for help would be too much too soon. This conversation clearly seems unwanted, an unwelcome interruption of Damian’s workflow. And then he realises he’s standing there like an idiot and turns and pads away quietly, hoping to see the others still in the Manor in bed or getting ready to sleep.

He passes by the living room, going to turn off the lights, when he spots a mop of dark hair on the couch. It could be any one of his kids, quite frankly – only Damian has thick curls, Talia’s curls, while the rest of them have straight dark strands. It’s a little easier to pick Jason out from them now, at least.

But this one is now a small child, huddled into the corner and his head on the armrest of the sofa. Dick’s eyes blink sleepily at the comic in his hand, which looks like it’s about to fall to the ground at any moment.

Bruce makes sure his footsteps are audible as he enters, and he can tell when Dick hears someone else entering. “Dick,” he says, voice low. “Aren’t you tired?”

Dick’s head turns towards Bruce, and though it’s barely been a day, Bruce can already see the dark circles beneath his eyes, stained not only from physical tiredness, but also from the mental strain and grief that's fresh in this mind. “Not enough to sleep.”

“I’ve got a nightlight in your room,” Bruce says, remembering back to Dick’s fears from before. “And Zitka’s still there, with your other… ones.” Once, he’d called them ‘toys’, and Dick hadn’t spoken to him for two days. “The house isn’t quite as empty as you remember it. You’ve got Damian and Tim’s rooms near yours. Jason might be spending the night nearby, as well.” *And mine*, he refrains from adding, because he doesn’t quite know whether that’ll be comforting or not.

Dick flops back onto the couch. “Maybe I’ll just spend the night here,” he says. “There’re so many *stairs*.”

Dick’s never complained about the amount of stairs, not at this age, anyway. And certainly not while he’s uninjured. Bruce tries not to worry about his body, but it’s in vain. “Would you like a piggyback?”

And that’s how Bruce finds himself, moments later, pretending to gallop up the staircase. Dick is as light as a feather on his back, and sometimes, when Bruce whinnies, he can hear quiet giggles in his ear, though for the most part, Dick stays silent and gingerly wraps his body around Bruce, only tight enough to avoid falling. In about a year's time, though, he’ll become an octopus. He’ll pretend to be a jockey, and squeeze his ankles into Bruce’s sides to urge him to go faster, which will never work, what with how ticklish Bruce is. And then he’ll discover Clark and Clark will offer him a piggyback, and Dick will proclaim that Clark is a Pegasus, and that’ll be the beginning of the end of his and Bruce’s piggyback rides—

Tim is staring at them. “What,” he begins to say, and Bruce quickly cuts him off.

“Language,” he says, breaking off from his triumphant neigh.

“I hadn’t even *said* anything,” Tim grumbles, leaning back against his doorframe. “I thought we were being invaded, is all.”

Dick lets out a silent laugh by Bruce’s ear. “You should join us next time,” he says. “Jason’s probably strong enough to piggyback you.”

Tim wrinkles his nose. “Yeah, no. Though maybe Cass’d be down to try.”

This is going in a dangerous direction; Bruce tries to derail it. “Were you heading to bed?” he asks, though it’s very obvious Tim was anything *but* ready for bed. He’s still in jeans, hasn’t even taken off his scarf and coat.

Tim shakes his head. “Just got here, actually. Bart dropped me off – I disabled the alarms after he left, so don’t worry about a malfunction.”

Bruce nods a little uncertainly – that'd been the last thing he'd been worried about. Tim's well beyond the age where he can ask him what he was up to, though before this whole thing, Tim had been very eager to share. His and Bruce' relationship had been more like Bruce's and Dick's, when Dick had been younger – they'd treated each other more like equals than father and son, and Tim had been very blunt about his life to Bruce, probably because he'd never seen Bruce as a father figure until it was very clear that he was. Much like with Dick, it would seem.

And now, Bruce worries he's ruined that. Worries that he's ruined everything.

"I'm going to take Dick to bed," he says, clearing his throat. "There are snacks downstairs, if you're hungry. Damian's doing his biomechanics homework…" He leaves it open-ended; he *could* be saying it to tell Tim of Damian's whereabouts, or he could be subtly asking Tim to lend Damian a hand. It all depends on how Tim interprets it.

Tim scrunches up his nose. "Why'd he decide to take that?" he says, shucking off his coat and hanging it behind his door. "I thought he wanted that animal one."

Bruce barely stops his face from reacting to the amount of knowledge Tim clearly has on Damian's school life, stuff Bruce can barely keep track of. "There weren't enough people interested, apparently."

"Hrm." Tim frowns. "Might go down and grab a snack after all. Sleep well, Dick!"

"Good night," Dick says; he'd been so quiet for their conversation that Bruce had thought he was dozing off again.

Bruce gently nudges open the door to Dick's room with his slippered foot. It opens without a creak, and the lights they'd installed a few months ago, the ones with motion sensors, turn on gradually as they step inside. Dick's bed is made up, and there's a pile of stuffed toys in the centre, tucked under the sheets.

Bruce leans down and peels the sheets back. Before, he would've dropped Dick onto the bed. He'd done that with him often – flung him onto the bed, the couch, trampolines, even harder objects like the balancing bars in the Cave. Dick had loved it, had always come away from it giggling and asking for Bruce to throw him again.

Now, Bruce is far too afraid of how fragile Dick's body may be. He leans down backwards and Dick climbs down and sits on the bed cross-legged, taking off his hoodie.

"Thanks for the ride," he says, stifling a yawn. "Is the nightlight on?"

Bruce spots the little Superman crest plugged into the socket by the bookshelves. "Yes, there it is, see?"

Dick snorts when he sees it. "B, I can't believe you kept that all these years," he says, and Bruce stiffens.

“I thought I'd gotten rid of it,” he says, trying not to show how thrown off he was by the abrupt change, “but Alfred apparently stored it away for safekeeping.”

“I’m glad,” Dick murmurs, lying down into the pillows. His hand snakes out from beneath the covers to grab Zitka, who’s looking as rough and aged as Dick does nowadays.

There’s nothing much left for Bruce to do, now. When he glances at the nightstand, there’s a pitcher of water and a half-full glass, covered with a coaster. The blinds are drawn; the nightlight will turn on when the lights go out. And Dick’s clearly on the road to falling fast asleep the moment his head touches the pillow.

“I’ll let you sleep,” he says, but Dick barely responds. Bruce leaves the door open a crack as he exits, backing out into the hallway.

Only to run into something. Bruce whirls around, and sees Damian standing there, arms crossed and an unreadable expression on his face.

“Damian,” Bruce says in surprise. “Did you need—”

“I thought,” Damian says, an unmistakeable bite to his words, “that you *wanted* to turn Richard back.”

“I do,” Bruce says, slightly perplexed. “Where’s this coming from?”

“Because,” Damian continues, “it doesn’t appear that you do. It *actually* appears that you *like* Richard being a child again, because you get a chance for a do-over.”

Bruce blinks. “Damian,” he says slowly. “I would never do that to Dick. Regardless of what you might think my wishes are.” But the thought *had* crossed his mind, he knows. He’d wondered about it, about the chance to fix the mistakes he’d made. And ultimately, he’d realised just how much more selfish and a mistake it’d be, to do that. But he has no idea how to verbalise any of this, especially not to Damian.

And all of a sudden, he wonders about *Damian*, who’d come to Bruce as ten-year-old, the second youngest of all of Bruce’s children. How must it feel for him to watch Bruce interact with Dick at such a young age, and compare it with Bruce’s interactions with himself? But Bruce has no idea how to change that now, years too late; his fingers itch, unbearably, to call Sarah. She’d have the perfect words, the perfect ways to get him to come to a solution, a game plan.

“Then I suggest you spend less time coddling him and more time focusing on a solution, *Batman*.” With that, Damian turns and stomps down the staircase. Bruce goes to follow him, and makes eye contact with Tim who’s standing on the little platform below holding two glasses of milk, sending Bruce an overly exaggerated grimace.

Bruce merely sighs and shakes his head, and goes to the Cave. Damian’s right – what *is* he doing upstairs at a time like this? They’ve just had a major breakthrough; he should be working. He *needs* to be working.

Three more night patrols and stakeouts give them the information they need. Bruce makes the plans: he has Kate, Dinah, and (grudgingly) Selina and Helena watching over Gotham. That leaves the seven of them – no, *six*, Bruce keeps having to correct himself – to infiltrate the base, rescue the hostages, and gather the information they need to cure Dick and ensure that the ringleaders will face a considerable time in prison.

And then he gets a call from Donna Troy.

"Bruce," she says. "Dick's told me that Batman has an operation he's planning on carrying out tonight. The Titans can help, if you need it."

Bruce hadn't been aware that Dick had been speaking so frequently with his friends, or that he was aware of their plans for tonight. "Thanks for your offer, Ms Troy," he says, "but we'll be fine. They're human, after all. Bringing in powered superheroes would be…"

"Overkill?" Donna suggests. "This is supposed to… cure Dick, isn't it?"

Bruce hesitates. "That's the hope."

"From what Dick's told me, you're thinking this is entirely scientific," Donna says. "Have you checked with Zatanna, perhaps, or Constantine, or Jason Blood, or let Raven take a look at Dick…?"

"I've sent a few samples to the JLA headquarters," Bruce says when she trails off, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I've had STAR Labs and Dr Mid-Nite look at it. The Flash told me they needed a vital part of the chemical make-up of whatever Dick was dosed with before they can reverse engineer it, and Dr Mid-Nite told me there was no trace of magic that he could detect."

There's a long exhale from the other end of the line, which comes through as static. "It's been a long few months," Donna offers as explanation. "If you need us, half of us are still stationed in New York. Give Alfred my best."

The enormity of this hasn't been lost on Bruce, but he's reminded of it yet again from this call, from the times Clark – off world on a personal matter for an unspecified amount of time – has called and asked him how things are going. It's not just their little circle that'll be affected if Dick dies.

A head pops into Bruce's study from the entrance to the Cave. "Yo, B-man," Steph says, "you coming?"

Bruce nods. Dick's asleep – things take a lot out of him, nowadays, and he hadn't complained about being sent to bed early, even when he'd frowned suspiciously when his siblings told him they heading back to their respective homes for the night. Alfred will be in the Cave for the operation, with Barbara on comms as well. But they've memorised the plans, timed the guard rotations. It'll be fine.

That's what Bruce tells himself as he slips into his armour, gets into the Batmobile with Damian beside him. It's a little strange to see the others driving out in front of him: Tim on Red Bird, Jason on whatever motorbike suits him this month, Steph in Ricochet, and Cass on the quad bike that Bruce got for her birthday. There are four of them out in front of him, and the passenger seat is filled, which hadn't always been true of every Robin he's had, but the fact that Dick's still missing because he *can't* be here is something Bruce's mind refuses to forget, no matter how hard he tries to shake it off.

They cut the lights when they enter the district, splitting up the way they'd planned. Damian sits forward in his seat. He's been nothing but formal with Bruce ever since the confrontation on the night of the first stakeout, and nothing Bruce has tried has gotten through to him. He tries again, one last time.

"Damian," he begins, and has no idea where to go from there. "We *will* figure this out. I need you to believe me when I say that. I know how much you miss him, the *proper* him. I do too, even if there are things I'd… go back and do again if I could."

Damian exhales loudly. "I understand, Father," he says, voice curt as ever. "But if tonight is fruitless—"

"You can't go in thinking like that. You need to believe it'll turn out the way we need it to." Bruce can't go on any further, because they'd arrived. He turns to Damian, one hand on his shoulder. He can't feel anything, too many layers of protective clothing between them, but he squeezes gently and he hopes Damian can feel that. "This *will* be a win for us. Say it."

When Damian meets his eyes, they're seeing each other through the layers of masks between them. "This will be a win for us," he says quietly, and gets out of the car.

Dick lies in bed, a comms unit in his ear, and waits until he hears the others leaving the Cave. And then he slinks out of bed. Alfred will be in the Cave right now, in front of the Batcomputer, but he won't be expecting Dick to sneak out tonight. He hasn't been lying, exactly, when he's gone to bed earlier and earlier each night and feigned tiredness. He's just… spent more time gathering his strength and supplies, because it turns out that those are *not* easy to come by now that he's so small.

He's not exactly sure *who* it is that's nudging him to do this, and distantly, he doesn't really know if he cares to pinpoint it. It's all of him at once, and his decision to make. He thinks, at least.

Dick has a Robin costume he's found in one of the backrooms of the Cave. It's like the one he currently wears, though there are now shoulder and knee pads, and flesh coloured tights to keep him warm. The pixie boots have reinforced soles, which make them heavier than the ones he wears – an acrobat should be able to feel what they're walking on, is what he believes, though he can't deny that these will certainly make some of the jumps and drops easier.

Slipping into it fills him with nostalgia, though technically, he's put this on just a week ago. He's gone out with Batman, on the hunt for Zucco, just last week, had finished his homework extra quickly because he'd done it during his lunch break at school, all so Bruce would let Dick come with him. And now, he tucks the grapple hooks and batarangs into his belt, and creeps downstairs.

The Robincycle is under a sheet in the garage area downstairs. There's no way for Dick to take it out without Alfred hearing it, so he doesn't think about that. He pads downstairs, and over to the bike, and quietly takes off the cover. And then he places his hand on the ignition pad, knowing his biometrics will let the bike start up.

It does so quietly, because it's meant for stealth and it's difficult sneaking around if your motorbike roars to life. But even so, as Dick sits on it and presses down on the accelerator, he sees Alfred's head whipping around.

"What on—" is all he hears before he guns forward, racing straight towards the quickest exit. He's calculated this in his head over the last few days: if he takes the mountain route, then Alfred will shut the door before he makes it out. But if he goes through the waterfall, then there's a chance he might make it. They've never got it to work as well as before, after the earthquakes.

There's a bend coming up ahead, but he has to make it to there before the gate is shut. Already, he can hear Alfred over the comms, informing the others of Dick's actions, can hear his frantic typing on the keyboard as he tries to shut down all the exits out of the Cave.

The gate narrowly misses Dick as he whirls past it, braking heavily just as he goes through the sheets of water coming down and yanks the steering wheel to the right. He's absolutely drenched – if he survives the lecture he'll get, then he's definitely going to have a cold by the end of this endeavour. Though, if they *are* successful, then perhaps transitioning to his older – current – self will reduce the impact.

There's a little pinging noise in Dick's ear, and he automatically clicks the button that'll transfer him to the private channel.

"Dick," Bruce's low voice is on the other end. "I don't know what your plan is, but do *not* come here. You're body is still weak, and your suit, I have no doubt, isn't nearly as bulletproof as you may think—"

"Batman, this is far more reinforced than the outfit I've been fighting in these last few months," Dick snaps. "This is *my* fight. I won't get in the way, if that's what you're asking." And with that, he switches back to the main channel, to make sure he really *won't* get in the way of their meticulous plans.

It's a cold and lonely ride to the warehouse. Dick's shivering more by the time he gets there – the exit he took was *definitely* created with the Batmobile in mind, and he should've planned to have an extra outfit, or at least a rainproof jacket, but it doesn't matter now. He's here. And he's been studying the blueprints late at night, when everyone else thinks he's sleeping.

Dick's first move is to grab the extra pair of night vision goggles he knows everyone keeps; Jason can get another pair when he's replenishing his supplies before the next patrol. The next step is to find the external door that leads to the basement; he's timed this as well as he could, though he knows that it's going to be touch and go – he has no idea if they're up to the smoke bomb part of their plans, and comms will be silent until it's over.

He taps the gas mask that's on his belt, reassuring himself it's still there. The guards will have been drawn into the building at this point, so he won't need to worry about them. There's another pinging in his ear, and he ignores it, until there are five more pings, and, annoyed, he flips to whichever was last.

"What," he mutters, keeping low and to the shadows, which is rather difficult in this outfit. Robin was made for dim city alleys and commercial buildings, not creeping around the woods.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" It's Jason, because Dick's luck really is that bad. Maybe Jason's subconscious somehow knows that Dick's been stealing from his bike.

"The same thing as you." There! He's found it. It's taken him much less time than he'd thought, though there's, unfortunately, someone standing guard outside it, speaking into her walkie-talkie.

Dick lowers himself behind a convenient rock, and gets out his sling shot. There are pebbles all over the place, which is lucky, because he hadn't brought any ammo himself.

"You want to get cured or not?" Jason demands, grunting a little just as Dick hears the sound of a muffled impact. "Stay out of this! Go patrol Gotham with the Birds of Prey or call up your team. I will *not* rescue your stupid ass again if you get yourself caught."

Dick's only half listening at this point. He's got the sling shot aimed at a tree right behind the guard's head, though he isn't sure the sound will be loud enough. He shifts focus, going for the metal of the fencing this time. And then, blowing warm breath over his frozen fingers, he releases it, and he's hit with a memory of Roy teaching the Titans to shoot.

The pebble flies true, hitting the metal of the pole with a *clang!* that rips through the silence of the night.

The guard whirls her head around, walkie-talkie out as she's pacing over to where the sound had come from. Dick doesn't waste any time; he runs as quietly as he can, keeping low. A few more rocks are in his hand, just in case he can't get the door open in time. But he doesn't intend on using finesse – this doesn't lead to the main building, just the loading dock, but it's all he'll need.

He breaks the padlock that's holding the door closed – which is wooden and rotting, which doesn't fill Dick with a great amount of confidence – and turns to close it behind himself quietly when there's a shout and loud footsteps. Then, gunfire.

Dick slams it shut, nearly catching a finger in the gap. The wood of the door barely does anything against the bullets; Dick flinches when a flying piece scrapes against his leg,

scraping against the tights, but he's lucky and he knows it.

If this is as exact a copy to the base they'd infiltrated as they could make it, then there'll be a little closet nearby. Dick almost runs past it, not expecting the path in front of him to fork into two, and instinctively takes the one that's hidden and dark. He swipes his goggles down, his own breath rattling in his chest as he tries to keep running.

It's no use; he has to stop for a moment, slow down to a walk. But there are plenty of random objects strewn all over the place here. Dick tries some breathing exercises he remembers showing children with asthma, for cases where they couldn't find a puffer, to quiet his breathing. He needs to be on the lookout for the guard trailing after him.

But first, he needs to find the door that'll lead him to the basement.

The blueprints hadn't shown this entire section of the building; all he knows is that he had to go straight, until he comes across a door. Dick hadn't been thinking about passes and keys – what would be the point of sneaking around and wasting time on stuff like that if his family were already causing a racket upstairs? But now he wishes he'd taken down the guard outside and stolen her pass.

Steph is supposed to be on hostage duty, because of her extensive medical training. Tim's supposed to be with her, but it all depended on the amount of resistance they found when they came through. And Dick knows he can be helpful. He can be Robin, guiding these people upstairs and to their vehicles beyond the trees, making sure they aren't stopped along the way.

It doesn't seem like the guard had followed him down here. Dick creeps through, marvelling a little at how quiet his footsteps are even in these heavy, unwieldy shoes. Maybe he *will* let Bruce make him those thick soles he'd practically been blackmailing Dick to wear.

His head spins a little at the knowledge that he doesn't exist, that his thoughts right now about his future don't *matter* because it's already happened. Nothing he does in this body has any impact, except maybe death. Everything he'd ever wanted – to kill Zucco, to capture Zucco – has already happened. But he can do this.

Dick keeps passing by maintenance doors that lead to singular rooms, dead ends. His heart rate is getting quicker and quicker, made worse every time he hears the little ping in his ear. The main channel is still quiet, though that's to be expected – they all know what their plans are. Hell, there's a chance that this *isn't* the main channel, because Dick hasn't actually heard anything being said on it since Bruce gave the go-ahead to leave the Cave.

He switches to the private channel, and is rewarded by a myriad of voices. Dick almost flinches, turning the volume down. Tim, Jason, and Damian are the only ones who appear to be using it, loudly proclaiming their every action. Steph chimes in every once in a while – it's clear she still hasn't reached the hostages. Bruce is silent, and Dick… hates that. It's throwing him off, not knowing where Batman is at all times. He's so used to knowing, so used to either working with it or using that knowledge to help him work around it.

There's a flight of stairs that'll lead him up, but it's the only way to go, unless he wants to double back. Dick goes up, not wanting to waste time even though he's operating in unknown territory.

He pulls the goggles up when he sees the light up ahead, immediately suspicious. But it's empty – any guards inside all seem to have flocked to the centre, where Jason, Cass, and Damian are doing their best to keep their attention.

But all of that unravels when Dick opens the only door in front of him and is thrust head first into the fight.

Dick slams the door shut immediately, but not before he's spotted. Already, he can hear shouts behind him, people chasing after 'the second Robin'. He can hear Damian's furious growl over the comms, ordering the 'cowards' to 'face their deaths'. It doesn't seem to work, not on all of them, because he's still being chased.

Running. All Dick knows are the slap of his feet against the concrete floor, the fluorescent lights that're boring holes into his head, and the gasps of his breath as he runs. Doors are everywhere, but there are no corners, no nooks, nothing to dart behind. Opening a door will take far too much time, and they're already gaining on him.

This was a terrible plan. They were right – Dick should've stayed in the Manor. What was he *thinking*, coming here, ruining the plans that his family had put so much time and effort into? Bruce was right; his body can't take this, and it's a new, foreign feeling, to not be able to rely on his own body.

He sneaks a glance behind him, and there, just as he slides around the corner, the black of bulletproof vests appears. They have handguns, though Dick's still too far ahead for them to be focusing on shooting. But it'll only be a matter of time, just until Dick hits a hallway that's long enough to be kept in their line of sight regardless of how far ahead he is.

"Robin!" A voice in his ear commands. Dick's body doesn't have it in itself to physically show surprise, but his mind jolts a little, like a small electric shock has run through his system. "Dick! Take the next left. The door's unlocked."

It's Barbara. Dick would normally say something, a little lighthearted jibe, would ask her if she'd been worried, but reassure that he had it all under control, and she would respond with something about him and his near death experiences, and Dick would grin and tell her he likes to keep her on her toes…

But now, he can't draw in a breath deep enough. He barely stops himself in time, hand grabbing at the door handle. It feels like he almost pulled it out of its socket when he slides, his sweaty grip the only thing stopping him from careening into a wall. And then he's getting his feet under him again, but this time, there are gunshots again.

Dick shoves into the door, realising too late he needs to pull. There's a piercing pain through his calf, and Dick gasps out, his leg nearly collapsing under him. His vision comes and goes, black dots all over the place.

Dick's been shot before. Normally, adrenaline would've kept him going, but it seems he's already asked too much of his body. The running and the cold shower have taken too much out of him. He pulls open the door, intent on crawling inside if that's what it takes, but he doesn't have to.

Purple hands grab at his arms, hauling him upright and forward, and then yanking the door shut and jamming it closed with a mop across the doorframe.

"Ah, shit," Steph mutters. "Hold tight, Boy Dumbass. That door's not gonna hold for nearly as long as we need it to."

Dick coughs a little; in his mind, he's still running. His brain hasn't caught up with the fact that he's stopped, though it certainly won't let him forget the fact that he's been shot. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "Just… wanted to help."

Steph sighs. "As much as I want to yell at you, I understand that." She's got him in a fireman's carry; Dick sees the trail of blood he's leaving as Steph first tries to jog, and then realises that while Dick's lighter than a boy of his age should be, he's still too heavy for her to run with.

The next thing Dick knows, he's being placed on a freezing metal table. There's rows upon rows of bars, cages all down the room. And worse yet, every one of them is a child, though their ages seem to vary from five or six to teenagehood.

"Okay, I need you to wrap this up for me, as tight as you can, and then some," Steph tells him, pushing a bundle of gauze into his hand. "It's gone through, which is lucky for us, but we needed to stop the bleeding yesterday. And I need to open up all these cages, and we're five minutes behind."

Dick doesn't apologise again. He takes the bandages and knots it around his calf, blacking out for a few seconds and almost biting through his lip. The white soaks through almost instantly, but as Dick layers it around, it takes a little more time. That's good, he knows. That means the bleeding is slowing a little. He knows the bullet missed his bones, which is so, so lucky.

There's a computer at the front of the room. Dick jumps down from the table and almost collapses on the ground, but he hauls himself up and starts to hobble towards it. He's already become a hindrance on this mission; he'll be damned if he'll weigh Steph down any more.

He's only just gotten himself logged into the system when Steph comes careening down the centre of the room. "They need me upstairs," is all she says before shoving a little USB at him. "Barricade the doors and keep them down here. The guards should be busy with us upstairs; we'll come get you when it's over."

And with that, she's gone. Dick's almost too afraid to switch channels and see how bad it *actually* is upstairs – besides, he needs to focus on his task at hand: freeing these people. He can feel their eyes on him as he bends his head, blinking to keep his vision focused and bracing himself with both hands on the tabletop because he keeps accidentally shifting his bad leg.

"You're Robin, right?" one of them shouts. "Is Batman here? Are you rescuing us?"

And all of a sudden, Dick realises something. These people have been dosed with the drug, and aged down. If they were all even roughly his age (his *normal* age), then that means they recognise *him*, not Damian. Not Steph who'd been here for at least half an hour, probably trying to convince them that a million other vigilantes had suddenly popped up in Gotham.

"Yeah!" he yells. "I'm Robin! And Batman's upstairs with more heroes! You're getting out of this, I promise!"

It's slow, and quiet, and awkward, but there's a whoop from the cells, and then a couple more, and Dick finds himself grinning even as he frantically tries to manoeuvre the computer to the controls. If only *this* was from when he'd been Robin.

He switches the comms channel and is bombarded with *sound.* Grunts, hollers, crashes, the *thwack* of batarangs landing… and on top of it all, there's the constant noise of his siblings as they call to each other throughout the battle. Dick can't make out individual conversations, but it makes him feel more attuned to the team, as opposed to a stray bird flying out of formation.

"Almost there, guys," he calls, chewing on his lip. He just has to get this main code right and all the doors will unlock automatically – he really should've fought one of the guards that had come after him, because this would've been *much* faster with one of their passes. Next time, he vows to himself, he'll stand his ground and fight.

And that's when disaster strikes, for what may be the second or third time that afternoon. There's a thump at the door that Dick had come through, and curses from the other side.

The kids go deathly quiet as the mop rattles, and then Dick feels all thirty-two gazes land on him.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he thinks, but doesn't say aloud, because Robin doesn't do that (though the others certainly have), and because he can't waste time now. He hits the last key, and for one horrifying moment, he thinks he's about to get an error message. Or it'll stutter and stop and he'll have to go right from the beginning again, which they do *not* have time for.

And then there's a mechanical *click*, all in one go, and the doors slide open.

For a moment, no one moves. And then there's a sound like the last day before summer break, gates open and everyone streaming out in one roar.

"Go, go, *go!"* Dick is yelling, even as he hobbles forward. There's nothing he can do about the guards – the mop isn't going to hold long enough for him to get out of here – but he can

make sure everyone else does.

But the last ones, the ones closest to Dick, who actually saw Robin… they pause. Two of them come and grab Dick by the arms. “We got you,” one of them says. “Come on.”

“I—thanks.” Dick doesn’t know what else to say. He’s just going to slow them down.

They reach the end of the hall, and try to barricade the door as well as they can. It’s not going to stop much – there’s no convenient piece of heavy furniture or thin metal handle that they can use to try keeping the door shut. The guards will be able to use their key to get through this instantly.

The stairs are going to be the death of Dick. He’s gasping and sweating, though he’s trying not to show it, and that’s when the door is kicked open.

In an instant, he’s loosened the grip he has on the kids beside him – Ari and Baz. “*Go,*” he tells them, giving them a little shove. It’s lucky the staircase is circular – it gives him a little more time. “I’m Robin. I’ve got this. You fellas just get yourselves out of here.”

He lets a batarang fly to show them just how serious he is, and is rewarded by a pained cry from below.

“We’ll send Batman down,” Ari tells him, and then runs up the stairs, Baz at her heels. “You better not die, Robin.”

“Don’t worry,” Dick says, mostly to himself. “I'm invincible.”

It’s lucky there aren’t that many of them coming after him: he doesn’t waste any more batarangs; instead, he pulls out his grapple hook and lets it fly, sticking itself onto the fourth floor. And then he grabs on for the ride, letting it yank him upwards and out of reach.

His family are on the first ground floor, though they’ve probably spread outwards since then. That’s where Dick heads as well, knowing that the kids he’s just freed will head as well, since it’s the most advertised exit here.

He lands badly, forgetting momentarily that his leg won’t hold his weight. His hands let go of the grapple hook the moment he hits the ground, and he crashes instead of rolling, the wind knocked out of him completely. Dick lies there for a moment, trying to draw in breath and get his body to cooperate.

Unfortunately, that’s when the second guard – the one he decided he’d prefer to outrun than stab – decides to appear. Dick’s hand goes to his belt, and he yanks out a batarang and throws it.

Even before it lands, he knows it’s not enough. His throw was too weak, his aim off. He’s scrambling backwards towards the door even as the guard gives him precious seconds by ducking out of the way of the weapon.

The one stroke of luck is that they don’t have a gun, just a little object that looks somewhat like a taser. Dick throws himself forward just as they fire it, and stabs the guard’s thigh. They

clearly weren't expecting Dick to come *towards* them, rather than away, and give a yell that's magic to Dick's ears. Dick yanks out the batarang and strikes again, but this time their hands are on his shoulders, digging in, their steel-toed boot kicking into his midsection.

Dick falls back, his body unable to hold him upright. There's a ringing in his ears as he hits the concrete of the ground, so close to the door that'll lead him one step closer to his backup. He's *Robin*, for god's sake. How can one guard take him down like this.

The guard chuckles. "Robin, huh?" they say. And then they crouch down. "Seems like a copy-cat to me. What happened, did you see Batman and his team roll in, decide to join in on the action?"

Anger courses through Dick at his words. This guard might not be at fault for the way his life has taken a detour downhill, but they're certainly not innocent. Dick reaches into his belt and pulls out the first thing his hand grasps.

And then he directs the nozzle at the guard and *sprays*.

Shark repellent is a curious thing. It's a mild annoyance for sharks, who swim away happily enough, but Dick has never aimed it at a person before. Hell, he wouldn't have even *had* this on his person if he hadn't been scrounging around the back rooms of the Cave, because the rest of the equipment would've been missed.

Dick had been hoping for the element of surprise. Now, he watches as the guard reacts to it like it's pepper spray, hands flying to their face. Dick kicks with his good leg, aiming for the crotch, and then he darts forward and grabs the little pass dangling from their waist.

"That," Dick says, panting with the effort it's taking for him to stand upright, "is for everyone you helped hold captive." The guard's face is bright red, swelling and blistering as though burned. Dick can't make himself feel bad about it. This time when he closes the door behind him, he knows this particular guard won't be following.

The comms are going off in Dick's ear. Dick wonders how he deals with it, because when Dick had been Robin – that is, when Dick had *actually* been this age – the comms had been just three people. There hadn't been any need for him and Bruce to talk to each other over them, usually, because they worked together, and Bruce didn't like splitting up. Going off and doing their own thing usually meant that one of them had intentionally left the other behind, and *that* meant that there was no point in using the comms, anyway.

A voice in Dick's head – one that makes him feel momentarily woozy to listen to – gives him little memories that make him feel… less alone. And Dick remembers comms with nine other people, four other people, seven other people, all kid superheroes. Dick tries to parse out their voices but the moment he begins to remember specific conversations, his head feels like it's being split open, and his knee buckles under him.

The voices abruptly cease, but that doesn't really help Dick. This is like being in the middle of one of those migraine episodes he's been having for the last few months or so – not necessarily in this body – but made ten times worse, because he has a hole in his leg and he's pretty sure his ribs are bruised at the very least.

"Guys?" he says into the comms, voice coming out worse than he'd expected. "Is anyone there?"

And all of a sudden, there's silence. "Robin?" Batman says, voice gravelly and low. "What's wrong? Where are you?"

"Are the hostages out?" Dick asks, trying to make himself sound normal.

"We have twenty-eight of them here," Steph interjects. "What happened?"

"They broke into the hostage room. Had to get them outta there."

"Gr—*Robin*, get yourself to the south exit and vacate the building," Damian snaps. He's come a long way if he's fine with calling someone else 'Robin', Dick thinks to himself, right before there's enough pain in his head that he can't think *anything*.

"Oracle will help you find somewhere to hide," Bruce is saying – did Dick make a sound? He has no idea. "Stay there. We'll find you after this."

Dick switches to a private channel with Steph. "Where are the other four?" he says. "You said twenty-eight."

Steph blows out a breath. "I'm getting them out," she tells him, but Dick can read what she isn't saying: she has no idea. "You hang tight, 'specially with that leg of yours. You're in no condition to fight."

Dick doesn't plan on fighting, but he'll be damned if there are kids left behind. He hauls himself upright; the cold metal railing of the staircase grounds him. The others left using the south exit – the four that are missing must be the ones straggling behind to help him. But there are countless places for them to have gone in here.

"Oracle," Dick says, trying to keep himself from breathing too heavily over the line, "you got anything on the lost kids?"

Barbara's voice is distracted when she speaks. "They've got some heat sensors scattered around the interior, mostly the basement, but they aren't picking up on anything—"

"Wait," Dick says suddenly, spotting something out of the corner of his eye. He staggers to a halt, blinking away the black dots in his vision. "Can you get access to the PI system?"

"Yes," Barbara says, in a tone that implies *obviously*.

"Patch me through?" It takes Babs all of thirty seconds to gain access to their speakers, and another few to give Dick access. He takes in a deep breath, and says, "Uh. This is Robin. If you're still in the building, congregate in the south stairwell, level three." His voice echoes

all through the empty space, bouncing from wall to wall. He leans his weight against a door and hopes the kids, wherever they are, can hear it.

Barbara is silent for a moment. “You realise you’ve just called all the guards to you as well, right?”

“It was the quickest way,” Dick mutters. He wishes he’d had time to scan over their files, to try figuring out a reference they’d understand that might fly over the heads of the guards in this building, but without that knowledge, the safest bet was to be direct. “This way, *everyone* knows where I am. B and the others can keep them busy, give us enough time to get out.”

“They’re already on it. I suggest you get a move on, Boy Wonder. You’re going to need to run regardless of who comes to find you.”

It doesn’t take long for one of the doors in the staircase to fly open. Dick, who’d been crouching in the dark, night goggles on over his eyes, peers over cautiously. And then he relaxes. “Up here!” he calls, waving them up. “Hurry!”

“Robin…” It’s Baz, the kid from before. Behind him are two others, one of whom is Ari. “We lost track of where the others were, and then got turned around trying to get out.” He’s breathing hard, but it doesn’t seem to be from any injury.

“I’m sorry,” Dick says, guilt churning in his gut. “You guys would’ve made it out if you hadn’t come back to help me.” He leads them into the hallway, and suddenly finds Baz and the other kid – the one he hasn’t seen before – suddenly lending themselves to him as crutches.

“You came in to rescue *us*,” the Ari says. “We couldn’t leave behind *Robin*.”

Dick doesn’t say anything to that, *can’t* say anything to that. Instead, he nods, and directs them to turn left. And comes face to face with two guards.

“Down!” he yells, and throws two batarangs aimed at their thighs.

The guards seem just as surprised to see them as they are – one of them cries out, falling to their knees with one of Dick’s batarangs lodged into their leg. The other, however, dodges just in time for the weapon to only rip the fabric of his trousers, and clatter on the floor behind them. Dick goes to throw another one, but his belt is empty.

There’s nothing else for him to do but launch himself at the guard, trying to get enough momentum going that he can take him down. But he’s lost more energy than he normally would’ve even with a bullet wound – the migraine, the toll this drug had taken on his body well before he’d inherited it, all of it is a steel anchor that’s physically weighing him down more than he’s ever felt before.

The guard grunts as Dick flings himself up to the man’s shoulders; initially, he’d been aiming to down him with just the momentum of his landing, but that hadn’t worked. Now, Dick spins himself around, simultaneously strangling the man and trying to knock him out with blows to the head.

And then the guard, staggering from wall to wall in the hallway, digs his fingers into Dick's wound.

Dick cries out, his hold on the guard momentarily loosening as waves of pain course through his entire body. He thinks he's pretty lucky he doesn't black out, but a moment later he's flat on the ground, and there's a gun pointed at his chest.

Dick has been in this position in many training sessions; he knows, from the brimming memories in his mind, that he's been on the other end of a gun in the field more times than he can count. Dick doesn't know if he has the energy to take the guard down, but something in him urges him to try anyway, and it sounds like himself.

"Robin," someone says, voice tremulous, and that's when Dick's eyes flick to the group of kids and his heart sinks.

In the two minutes that he'd been fighting, they've been surrounded by three other guards, each holding a gun to the head of Ari, Baz, and the third kid whose name Dick wishes he'd gotten. The one he'd stuck a batarang into is on the ground behind Dick, but has somehow scrounged up a taser, aimed right at Dick's head.

"Give up, kid," the guard says. "Dunno where you got that outfit, but you're no Robin." He kicks at the batarang lying on the ground, and it skids to the other end of the hall, out of Dick's reach. "Each time you try something, one of your friends here gets a hole in them. We'll see how long they last till they bleed out."

Some part of Dick knows that they need these kids, that they're what this whole enterprise is making so much money out on, but they're also *replaceable*. And Dick can't save them all.

"I'll cooperate," he says through gritted teeth. "Just don't hurt them."

"Pinky promise," the guard tells him, and then there's a flash of bone-jarring pain from behind, and Dick's vision goes mercifully black.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!! We've only got a couple more chapters left to go 0_0

I'm also writing a piece for Flight: a Dick Grayson zine, so check that out here!!! We've got an incredibly talented group of ppl who've contributed to it :D

End Notes

* Specifying the year is a whole new library of trouble that I'm not even going to think about lol

Events referenced are from The New Titans (1988) #55.

I have a very brief outline plotted right now so the posting schedule is going to be whenever I have a chapter's worth of writing done. I also don't quite know how long this is going to be, because the outline is still incomplete. This is probably the most unplanned I've ever been going in to a chapter fic so fingers crossed I don't write myself into a wall =D

Thank you for reading!! Let me know what you think and feel free to come chat on tumblr ^~^

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!